The New Criterion

June 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *June 2000*

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Timeless Moments
Art Quilts by MARILYN HENRION

Byzantium VIII (Reflections)" 34" x 48" Hand pieced, hand quilted.

"History is a pattern of timeless moments..." T.S. Eliot

It is fitting that these words of T. S. Eliot were chosen by the artist to commemorate this millennium exhibition. Working in the timeless medium of textiles, Marilyn Henrion creates metaphorical images as she celebrates the quilt as a canvas for artistic expression. As a contemporary manifestation of a traditional craft, the art quilt explores and expresses aesthetic concerns common to the whole range of visual arts, while retaining, through material or technique, a clear relationship to the folk art from which it descends.

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Notes & Comments: June 2000

The New Criterion Poetry Prize

The New Criterion began publishing poetry in April 1984, about a year and a half after its first issue appeared in September 1982. That April, we published poems by Donald Hall, Brad Leithauser, and Donald Petersen. Over the following sixteen years, we have published hundreds of poems by poets young and old, celebrated and obscure. In the world of poetry, *The New Criterion* is probably best known as a champion of what has come to be called the New Formalism. But, while subscribing to the sentiment behind Robert Frost's comment that he would as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down, we have in fact published poems in many styles and forms, including a fair amount of free verse. Although it can certainly be said that we are not hostile to traditional poetic forms, our first criterion has always been to publish well-made poems that display linguistic sensitivity and aesthetic intelligence.

With this in mind, we are pleased to announce the first annual New Criterion Poetry Prize for a manuscript of poems that pay close attention to form. Outside judges for the contest this year will be Donald Justice and Elizabeth Spires, who will deliberate with the editors to determine the winner. The winning poet will receive $3000, and the winning manuscript will be published by the Chicago publisher Ivan R. Dee. Additional details regarding the contest will be found in the advertisement we have placed at the back of this issue.

"They're wanton"

We know it's considered uncool to sound an alarm about any aspect of pop culture these days. Rock, rap, and their even more extreme offspring—horrorific movies, loathsome television shows, and pornography on the Internet—are now established as mainstream culture. The conventional liberal—and libertarian—wisdom is not only that there is nothing to be done about it but also that nothing should be done about it. No matter how vulgar or violent or corrupting our pop culture becomes, we are expected to take the debased products of the pop-culture industry in our stride and let them prosper without criticism or censure. We know that there will never be a Million Mom March in Washington to protest such stuff.

Never mind the debilitating effect of this pop culture on the kids who are its principal consumers and principal casualties. Adults like this stuff, too, so it's OK. This includes allegedly adult artists—you know, the kind

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that exhibit their work in galleries and museums—who are more and more drawn to both the content and the techniques of pop culture for what used to be called aesthetic inspiration.

We all know, too, the kind of momentum that drives the market for pop culture. It's not only the decibel levels that must constantly be raised, but also the level of shock to the nervous system and the assault upon the moral sensibilities of young and old alike. Like drug consumption, inducements to derangement must constantly be increased lest their effects disappoint expectation and the products suffer in the marketplace of incendiary sensations.

Consider, as a recent example, this excerpt from a report in *The New York Times* of May 4 on "The Pop Life":

> SAN ANTONIO—It was a spellbindingly intense and brutal performance, and the concert hadn't even begun. Slipknot, an explosive rock nonet from Des Moines, was seething in a large holding room backstage at the Live Oak Civic Center just outside the city, warming up like a football team psyching itself for a particularly fierce playoff game. Its members, each masked and wearing orange prison coveralls, were pacing across the room in different directions. A musician in a grotesque clown mask menacingly swung a large PVC pipe as he choked a rag clown doll in his other hand; another, in a gas mask, squirted bottled water onto a lone groupie's T-shirt; others brandished wooden planks, punched walls or dropped to the floor to stretch.
>
> Suddenly they met in a huddle, threw their hands to the center, and let loose a ferocious scream that drowned out the 3,000 fans chanting "Slipknot." Then, one by one, they emerged onto the stage, driving the crowd—wearing shirts pledging allegiance to other new hard-rock bands like Sevendust, Staind, Papa Roach, and System of a Down—into a frenzy. Two teenagers had already been treated for injuries before Slipknot had even finished thrashing, banging, and raging through its first song about exploding angst. "It feels so easy to make a connection with these kids," said Matt McDonough, or Spag, the drummer in Slipknot's opening act, the face-painting scream-rock group Mudvayne. "They're wanton. Slipknot have them so pumped up that you could walk up to a mike and burp, and they'd go crazy."

According to Neil Strauss, the pop music critic who wrote this report and two other pieces on Slipknot for that issue of the *Times*—accompanied, by the way, with no fewer than six photos—Slipknot is "one of the most exciting and enigmatic of rock's current crop of new bands."

What is noteworthy about this enthusiastic endorsement of mindless decadence in our so-called "paper of record" is not that it is unusual. On the contrary, such encomia are a staple of contemporary "arts coverage," not only in *The New York Times*, of course, but also in practically every mainstream media outlet. But it is worth pausing, we think, to ask ourselves what it means that an institution like the *Times* should lavish such attention to discriminate for its readers between the merits of "grunge," "heavy metal," "punk," and other species of nihilistic anti-music. Mr. Strauss notes that none of the bands he discusses "represents a new direction for rock." What matters is their outlet of adolescent rebellion: "Teenage angst demands its antiheroes," Mr. Strauss explains, "and in the absence of any other popular rock uprising since grunge these acts . . . have made it exciting again to grow up a rock fan."

"To grow up a rock fan?" In an important sense, to be a rock fan is precisely *not* to grow up. We have had occasion in this space before to cite Allan Bloom's criticism of rock music. It is worth repeating some of our earlier reflections now. "Rock music," Bloom wrote, "provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with

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which it is allied. It artificially produces the exaltation naturally attached to the completion of the greatest endeavors." We know that Bloom's point was difficult to accept even for some people who were otherwise sympathetic to his argument. How could rock be such a bad thing? Hasn't it become just one more middle-class entertainment, enjoyed by kids everywhere?

To be sure it has, as CD sales and performances like Mr. Strauss's attest. But for Bloom that is precisely the problem. The fact that rock has been domesticated and commercialized, that it is now big business and mass entertainment, does not change its essential character. Its appeal is the appeal of the Dionysian: rock is anti-order, anti-verbal, anti-intellect. It is about unconstrained sexuality and polymorphous gratification. That is why its main enthusiasts are adolescents, young and old. They are right that rock music is a liberation: it is a liberation or vacation from civilization. In the deepest sense, it is a liberation from music, whose essence is order. Bloom came down hard on rock because, like Plato, he understood the power of music to educate our emotions at the most basic level. Rock is an education for chaos and narcissism. There are, of course, many competing claims for a child's emotional allegiance; rock music is only one of a host of attractions besieging young people for attention. But because "the first sensuous experiences are decisive in determining the taste for the whole of life," Bloom was right to call attention to the dark, seductive side of rock music. "Nihilism," he observed, is often "revealed not so much in the firm lack of beliefs, but in the chaos of the instincts or passions."

Toward the end of one of his pieces on Slipknot, Mr. Strauss quotes the band's drummer: "A guy at Sony told us, 'If this is the future of music, I don't want to be alive.' I just thought, 'If that's what he thinks, then we are doing something right.'" The real question is, what have we—our culture—done wrong?

Penelope Fitzgerald, 1916–2000

A friend writes:

Penelope Fitzgerald, a sublimely gifted and versatile writer, died in London on April 28, at the age of eighty-three. Her book reviews and essays are a model of amateur criticism. Her concise, discreet, intuitive lives remind us that biography belongs to literature, and that the ideal biographer is not an academic specialist, not a forensics expert, but an informed heart in service to the truth about a fellow human being. She was English to the bone and so naturally loved puzzles and games and intellectual entertainments; she wrote ghost stories in the tradition of M. R. James and a humorous locked-room murder mystery complete with codes and ciphers. But it is for her novels—her eight brief, witty, and wholly original novels—that she will be remembered. Here, in the words of Frank Kermode, is "fiction in which perfection is almost to be hoped for, as unostentatious as true virtuosity can make it, its texture a pure pleasure."

Everything God sent her to do she did with all her might, including filling out her publishers' questionnaires. For one such document she wrote the following notes about herself. "Although I didn't start writing until late in life"—her first book, a biography of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, was published when she was almost sixty—"I was born into a 'writing family.' . . . My father [Edmund Knox] was the editor of *Punch* from 1932 to 1945. His brother Dillwyn—my uncle Dilly—was a wartime codebreaker and a peacetime decipherer of ancient Greek manuscripts. Two other uncles were priests . . . and two of the most convincing Christians it would be possible to meet." Wilfred was an Anglo-Catholic agitator for social reform; Ronnie—Monsignor Ronald Knox—was, quite simply, the most famous English Catholic of his era. Except for Dillwyn, who published little and apparently said even less,

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"writing came to them as naturally as breathing, though [none] was very good with a typewriter."

She memorialized her remarkable family in her second book, *The Knox Brothers*. Her third and final biography was of the poet Charlotte Mew, a book that, being true to life as Fitzgerald understood it, is both haunting and very funny. A morbidly conscientious woman at odds with her times and her own nature, her life a sad tangle of misunderstandings (mainly about herself) yet punctuated by moments of grace, Mew is of a piece with the protagonists of Fitzgerald's novels. "I feel drawn," Fitzgerald wrote, "to people whom the twentieth century considers expendable, but who don't give up. As far as I'm concerned, they are not failures, for no one who shows courage"—the courage that comes from simply choosing to survive—"can ever be considered a failure."

Fitzgerald's early novels were autobiographical in inspiration. They came, in a coruscating burst of creativity, at the rate of roughly one a year from 1978 to 1982. *The Bookshop*, the first and perhaps the best-loved of her novels, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize; the second, *Offshore*, took the prize the following year. They form a kind of diptych: each concerns a woman attempting to live in a world that refuses her, one the proprietor of an embattled small-town bookshop, the other the mistress of a slowly sinking houseboat. *Human Voices* remembers the wartime BBC, where, just out of college, Fitzgerald held an entry-level job and fell in love "with someone older and more important, without the least glimmer of a hope of any return." *At Freddie's* concerns Italia Conti, a school for child actors where Fitzgerald was employed as a tutor, and its eccentric, tyrannical founder-director, "a natural grande dame of a species which, allowed to flourish unchecked, becomes in time uncontrollable." Each of these novels is a tragedy dressed out as a comedy, "for otherwise," Fitzgerald said, referring to the human lot, "how can we manage to bear it?"

With *Innocence* (1986), an *Emma* set in Tuscany after World War II, Fitzgerald began what she called "a journey outside of myself," a masterly series of novels set in places and times remote from her own experience. *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), nominally the story of an Anglo-Russian printer in Moscow on the eve of the revolution, is a lament for an entire civilization, an entire way of human life, about to be washed away by history. *The Gate of Angels* (1990) revisits her uncles' Cambridge and the debate between "those old friends and antagonists, soul and body, intuition and reason." *The Blue Flower* (1995), her final masterpiece and the novel that won her a large international audience, takes us farthest away of all. Set in the Saxony of Goethe and Schiller, it dramatizes the birth of the Romantic impulse by way of a fictionalized biography of Novalis.

Penelope Fitzgerald's final days were a battle against crippling arthritis, about which she didn't complain, and against the enticing distractions of fame, about which she did—with good humor. She worked until the end: book reviews of *Ravelstein* and the Klemperer diaries, introductions to works by J. L. Carr and Jane Austen. Her last month was a crowded one, correcting the typescript of two final books: a collection of stories called *The Means of Escape*, and a new American edition of *The Knox Brothers*. Both will appear in the fall.

For us, as for all of her readers, her passing leaves the world much diminished. It was a privilege, and a rare kind of aesthetic thrill, to be alive in her time and to watch her gift unfold.

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Closing time? Jacques Barzun on Western culture

by Roger Kimball

One day the last portrait of Rembrandt and the last bar of Mozart will have ceased to be—though possibly a coloured canvas and a sheet of notes may remain—because the last eye and the last ear accessible to their message will have gone.

—Oswald Spengler, 1918

It is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair.

—Cyril Connolly, 1949

The historian Jacques Barzun has been a voice of moderation and sanity in American intellectual life for some six decades. Born in France in 1907, he came to the United States in 1920. For many years, he was an ornament to the faculty of Columbia University. One still occasionally hears about his battle to preserve the core curriculum and the famous seminar he conducted with the literary critic Lionel Trilling. Some of Mr. Barzun's approximately thirty books—I think particularly of *Teacher in America* (1945) and *The House of Intellect* (1959)—were bestsellers that influenced debate about culture far beyond the realm of academic history. Mr. Barzun has always had a teacher's gift of dramatizing ideas and championing what, in *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* (1941), he called "the pluralism of the world of experience." Although deeply immersed in intellectual matters himself, he seems never to have succumbed to the intellectual's chief occupational temptation of mistaking abstractions for the realities they adumbrate. This resistance has had stylistic as well as substantive consequences. Mr. Barzun once noted that "Intellect watches particularly over language because language is so far the only device for keeping ideas clear and emotions memorable." Accordingly, his own success in these salutary endeavors has been due partly to responsible prose: clear, unpretentious, always favoring the homely concrete word over the fancy bit of fashionable jargon. His success has also been due to his ability to grasp what was really at stake in the intellectual and artistic currents he charted. In Mr. Barzun's hands, intellectual history is less an academic than an existential pursuit; reading him, you understand that curiosity about the past is at the same time a species of self-interrogation. The questions with which intellectual history confronts us can be parsed as elements of that large, perennial question, "How should I live my life?"

From Dawn to Decadence,[1] Mr. Barzun's overview of the last five-hundred years of Western cultural history, is a magnificent *summa* of his concerns as a thinker and historian. It synthesizes as well as summarizes a long lifetime's reflection about the fate of

1 *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present*, by Jacques Barzun; HarperCollins, 896 pages, $36.

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those distinctive energies that define Western culture: "the great achievements and the sorry failures of our half millennium." The first thing to be said about *From Dawn to Decadence* is that reading it is an exhilarating experience. I mention this partly to reassure those intimidated by the book's length, partly to mollify those put off by its admonitory title. At nearly nine-hundred closely printed pages, *From Dawn to Decadence* certainly is long, but it is also a rich tapestry of a book—the product, Mr. Barzun remarks, of accidents like "insomnia and longevity," as well as of immense scholarship. Despite the book's intimidating girth, I suspect that many readers will, like me, come to feel about it the way one feels about certain long novels. For the first hundred pages or so, a mixture of wariness and anticipation predominates: will the book really repay the time and effort it demands? These feelings give way, as one settles into the story, to eager excitement. Finally, as the end approaches, one finds oneself madly trying to prolong the experience and delay coming to the final page.

As for the title: while it accurately describes the book's trajectory—from the dawn of the Renaissance to the decadence of our own time—Mr. Barzun is justified in claiming that "the lively and positive predominate." *From Dawn to Decadence* is not a work of lamentation but of historical investigation: I almost said "historical adventure." Mr. Barzun does not hesitate to pass judgment on the failures, present as well as past, that he chronicles. He is convinced that our age, despite its extraordinary technological capabilities, is an Alexandrian age: a time of cultural sunset, depleted energies, moral confusion. But the tenor of his discussion is one of inexhaustible curiosity. His message is sobering but his tone is exuberant. Like the best travel writers, he manages to combine the authority of first-hand knowledge with the delight of discovery. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things about this remarkable book is the sense of freshness that Mr. Barzun brings to what inevitably is well-trodden ground. When one recalls that Mr. Barzun is now comfortably into his nineties, one's admiration ripens into astonishment.

One of things that distinguishes *From Dawn to Decadence* from myriad other cultural histories of the West is its structure. Mr. Barzun has clearly expended a great deal of thought on the organization of the book. The result is an intricate verbal architecture with many interconnecting passages, points of entry, exhibition hallways, and impressive vistas. There is even a folly or two. On the most pedestrian level, Mr. Barzun has divided his story into four large historical segments. The first segment takes us from Luther's Protestant revolution to Newton—from the early sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century. Part two opens with the ascent of Louis XIV and the rise of the nation state; it ends with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (fittingly symbolized by its chief tool of emancipation, the guillotine). Part three, which opens with a section called "The Work of Mind-and-Heart," details the Romantic reaction—that is to say, the Romantic *reactions*, for they were many and disparate—to Enlightenment rationalism. Here Mr. Barzun takes his story from the time of Goethe and Wordsworth to the pre-World-War-I period he calls the Cubist Decade. Part four of *From Dawn to Decadence* brings the story up to the moment: the titles of the book's last two sections indicate the tenor of the assessment: "Embracing the Absurd" and "Demotic Life and Times."

Mr. Barzun shuttles deftly between religion, philosophy, literature, music, political intrigue, and the development of scientific rationalism and modern technology. He is as interested in Petrarch's role in the rise of humanism as in the historical accidents that led to Madrid's becoming a capital city in the sixteenth century (Charles V hoped that the air of the tiny village, which newcomers disparaged as "nine months of winter, three of hell," might be good for his health). He weaves his story partly around a handful of recurrent themes: primitivism, individual-

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ism, emancipation ("the modern theme par excellence"), self-consciousness, specialization, abstraction, analysis, and scientism ("the fallacy of believing that the method of science must be used on all forms of experience and, given time, will settle every issue"). These are the leitmotifs that—expressed in different registers and with varying degrees of emphasis—have provided intellectual fuel for the development of modern Western culture.

For example, Luther's challenge to Catholic orthodoxy can be seen as an expression of primitivism—a desire to recapture the essentials of Christian faith—together with strong elements of individualism ("the priesthood of all believers") and emancipation. We forget that Luther started not as a revolutionary but as a reformer; in the beginning, Mr. Barzun points out, he "only wanted to elicit the truth about the sacrament of penance." But events acquire a momentum of their own. Had it not been for the new technology of printing, which spread ideas with unprecedented speed, Luther's ninety-five theses might never have ignited the soul of Europe. In the event, Luther's reformation became a revolution: what Mr. Barzun calls "The West Torn Apart." Among much else, the Reformation illustrates the conundrum of contingency: the fact that a quantum of unpredictable novelty can always be counted on to baffle human complacency. Why here? Why now? Speculation is always confident, always inconclusive. As Mr. Barzun observes, "How a revolution erupts from a commonplace event—tidal wave from a ripple—is cause for endless astonishment."

And what a tidal wave:

> Manners are flouted and customs broken. Foul language and direct insult become normal, in keeping with the rest of the excitement—buildings defaced, images destroyed, shops looted. Printed sheets pass from hand to hand and are read with delight or outrage —Listen to this! Angry debates multiply about *things long since settled: talk of free* love, of priests marrying and monks breaking their vows, of property and wives in common, of sweeping out all evils, all corruption, all at once—all things for a new and blissful life on earth. . . .
>
> Voices grow shrill, parties form and adopt names or are tagged with them in derision and contempt. Again and again comes the shock of broken friendships, broken families. As time goes on, "betraying the cause" is an incessant charge, and there are indeed turncoats. Authorities are bewildered, heads of institutions try threats and concessions by turns, hoping the surge of subversion will collapse like previous ones. But none of this holds back that transfer of power and property which is the mark of revolution and which in the end establishes the Idea.

The fact that this evocation describes many revolutionary periods besides Luther's is of course part of Mr. Barzun's point. It is one of his tasks in *From Dawn to Decadence* to remind readers of "the persistence of meanings within altered expressions of life's mysteries." History is not, as one wag put it, simply "one damn thing after another." There are patterns to be observed and docketed even if they can never be entirely plumbed. At the same time, Mr. Barzun is right that "likeness is not sameness. In history everything wears its own dress and raises images peculiar to itself." A prime test of an historian's skill is the extent to which he does justice to these complementary forces, repetition and novelty. It is a further testimony to Mr. Barzun's nimbleness that he reserves a place for the action of whim and unpredictability in human affairs. Movements in art or thought, he observes, gain influence at the cost of variety: "Victory brings on imitation and ultimately Boredom," surely one of the most underrated catalysts of historical change. It is part of an historian's task to discern continuities in what had hitherto appeared random; it is also part of his task to recognize the limits of those continuities. "Age of . . ." is a favorite historian's shorthand: the Age of Reason, the Age of Faith, the Age of Science, the Age of Anxiety. Such phrases are

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probably indispensable; they are also, Mr. Barzun observes, "always a misnomer, except perhaps 'An Age of Troubles,' which fits every age in varying degrees."

Mr. Barzun employs several devices to impart texture and complexity to his narrative. He punctuates his text with parenthetical page references that point the reader to a later or earlier section of the book where the theme under discussion is continued or anticipated. He includes six "cross sections"—"The View from Madrid Around 1540," "The View from Venice Around 1650," etc.—in which he focuses not so much *on* the city in question (London in 1715, Weimar in 1790, Paris in 1830, Chicago in 1895) as the view *from* the city. These more or less free-standing essays allow him to summarize, recap, digress: "to survey events and ideas of mixed kinds as they might be noted or heard about by an alert observer at a given time and place." Mr. Barzun also includes a kind of running bibliography. Many of his discussions conclude with a parenthetical recommendation: "The book to browse in is . . . ," "The essay to read is . . ." Many of these recommendations have what might be described as a vintage flavor. They tend to be classics—personal favorites, one suspects—rather than the latest scholarship. If this procedure occasionally imparts a kind of period feel to the discussion, it also deepens the book's humanity. What Mr. Barzun offers is less a trip through the literature than the refraction of history through a particular, highly cultivated sensibility. Discussing the vicissitudes of travel in the sixteenth century, for example, he points readers not to the latest university press production but confidently says that "the travel book to read is Montaigne's Diary of 1580–81." Likewise, when discussing Bath around 1830, he says that "the description to read is that in chapter XXXV of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*."

Mr. Barzun is a master of digression. One sign of his mastery is his knack of making digression serve the progression of his larger argument. Several times in the course of his discussion he will pause to offer readers a digression on a particular word—on "*esprit*," for example, or "romantic," or "man." (Bucking contemporary feminist orthodoxy, he continues to use "man" to refer to all of humanity—primarily, he tells us, for four reasons: "etymology, convenience, the unsuspected incompleteness of 'man and woman,' and literary tradition." He has convincing things to say about all four.) Although plenty interesting in themselves, these linguistic detours also serve his larger purpose. Thus his meditation on *esprit* (together with "genius" and "*Geist*") occurs in the context of his discussion of Pascal's famous distinction between *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse*—two tendencies of temperament that, together, rule the world—and his "digression on a word" turns out to be the most economical way to set forth ideas he will return to repeatedly.

From Dawn to Decadence also offers readers a veritable commonplace book with a running series of what Mr. Barzun calls "add-ins," brief quotations from disparate sources in bold type and set apart from the text. Like the chorus in a Greek play, these quotations reflect on the main action; some are drawn from the authors being discussed, others form an ironical commentary. Discussing the classical sources of Renaissance humanism, he includes this "add-in" from Dean Briggs of Harvard College *circa* 1900: "The new degree of Bachelor of Science does not guarantee that the holder knows any science. It does guarantee that he does not know any Latin." Some of Mr. Barzun's quotations are merely amusing: *Tycoon:* "I need a man who can say 'No' when I talk nonsense. Are you that man?" *Applicant for job:* "No." Others are knowingly ironical: "We cannot be wrong, because we have studied the past and we are famous for discovering the future when it has taken place" (Disraeli, 1851). Still others are painful home truths: "Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is trying to destroy it" (Jean-François Revel, 1970). And yet others are gems from the cabinet of world-weary cynicism: "Art is

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what you can get away with" (Andy Warhol, 1987).

History is the product of individual initiative aided or stymied by chance. "Above all," Mr. Barzun observes, it is "concrete and particular, not general and abstract." Reinforcing this conviction, he has included scores of "pen-portraits" of people who helped make history: Luther and Leonardo, Rabelais and Rubens, Giordano Bruno, Oliver Cromwell, Shakespeare (twice), Bach and Mozart, Rousseau and Burke and Samuel Butler. Women are also well represented in Mr. Barzun's gallery. Isabella of Castile, Catherine de Medici, Margaret of Parma, Elizabeth I, Marguerite of Navarre, Christina of Sweden (the "wondrous Christina"), and Florence Nightingale are some of the women he discusses. He quotes a marvelous conversation from Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Talking about Byron and other poets with a city notable in Cincinnati, Mrs. Trollope asked: "And Shakespeare, sir?" "Shakespeare, madam, is obscene, and thank God we are sufficiently advanced to have found it out."

Not all of Mr. Barzun's personages occupy the first rank of fame. He gives as much space to the Renaissance philosopher and historian of science Joseph Glanvill (author of *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*) as to many better known figures, and he includes a number of personal favorites: Walter Bagehot, the playwright Beaumarchais (author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*), and even the mystery novelist (and, it should be added, translator of Dante) Dorothy L. Sayers. Mr. Barzun is everywhere ready to rehabilitate a reputation unjustly diminished or to challenge received wisdom that unfairly pigeonholes its victim. About Beaumarchais, for example, he reminds us that, in addition to his literary achievement, he did as much as Lafayette to aid the cause of the American revolution by surreptitiously channeling money from the French government to the fledgling American army. He begins his discussion of Jonathan Swift by noting that "first one must clear the air of the conventional catchwords, namely that he was a misanthropist and a misogynist obsessed with scatology, and moreover a bigoted politician who never got over his failure to be made a bishop and died mad." In fact, Mr. Barzun maintains, Swift deserves to be called "a philanthropist of the most practical kind," namely, one whose efforts were directed toward particular individuals, not that unreachable abstraction "the masses."

Inevitably, readers will differ from Mr. Barzun in some of his judgments. I found him too kind to Cromwell, Rousseau, and that brilliant crank, George Bernard Shaw. What matters, though, are how many worthy figures he rescues from obscurity or semi-obscurity. He begins his discussion of the English critic William Hazlitt by quoting Robert Louis Stevenson: "We are all clever fellows, but we cannot write like Hazlitt." Hazlitt's sentences, Mr. Barzun observes, "feel hot from the forge." They communicate the drama of ideas being worked out "live." "In whatever his mind lights on, Hazlitt finds the deep source of the matter and traces its implications and ramifications; . . . it is not analysis, it is judgment encompassing its object, leaving it whole and illuminated." He witheringly observes that this sort of criticism is out of favor today because "it follows no system, lacks a jargon, and affords pleasure when read."

It is a pleasure to find an historian who does justice to literary pleasure. About the early nineteenth-century wit and clergyman Sydney Smith, Mr. Barzun writes that "Smith's discourse was conversational, often humorous; it dramatized ideas by describing situations and it could be eloquent at the right pitch and the right places. Here was a pamphleteer propounding what is just, humane, and tolerant without himself ignoring these virtues by writing like a fanatic." Smith was an important reformer; he was also invaluable at the dinner table. When someone complained about the way Macaulay tended to monopolize the conversation, Smith agreed but noted that "he has occasional flashes of silence that make it

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quite delightful." Reviewing some travels in South America, Smith describes the sloth hanging beneath a branch: "he passes his life in suspense, like a young clergyman distantly related to a bishop." Many readers will also be grateful to know about the American satirist Finley Peter Dunne (1867–1936), creator of Mr. Dooley who once described John D. Rockefeller as a kind of "Society f'r th' Prevention of Croolty to Money. If he finds a man misusing his money, he takes it away fr'm him and adopts it."

Even Homer nods, and it is only to be expected that a book of this scope will contain a few slips. It was Terence, not Plautus, who said, "I am a man. Nothing human is alien to me." The builder of the Crystal Palace in London was called Joseph Paxton, not James Parton. Hamlet told his mother that "Use almost can change the stamp of nature," not "Use can almost . . . ," etc. But these are small things, easily rectified. Mr. Barzun's book triumphs marvelously in its two main purposes. One is to exhibit the sheer richness of that cultural explosion we summarize in two words as "the West." The picture of the West promulgated by its enemies—"a solid block having but one meaning"—cannot survive scrutiny. It is central to Mr. Barzun's task to show that the West has in fact been "an endless series of opposites—in religion, politics, art, morals, manners." Moreover, to denounce Western culture "does not free the self from what it hates, any more than ignoring the past shuts off its influence."

> Even the terrorist who drives a car filled with dynamite toward a building in some hated nation is part of what he would destroy: his weapon is the work of Alfred Nobel and the inventors of the internal combustion engine. His very cause has been argued for him by such proponents of national self-determination as President Wilson and such rationalizers of violence as Georges Sorel and Bakunin, the Russian anarchist.

If *From Dawn to Decadence* is partly a celebration of the West, it is also an elegy for its passing. Mr. Barzun's second large purpose is to delineate the evolution of that decadence his title announces. Early on he tells us that the word "decadence" is "not a slur; it is a technical label." But that is not entirely candid. For one thing, being a slur is not incompatible with being a technical term. For another, Mr. Barzun's summary of what he calls "our present decadence" shows that he does not regard decadence as a neutral historical fact but as a cultural, moral, and political disaster of the first order.

As one would expect, the sources of decadence are many and varied. Mr. Barzun shows how, from one perspective, the symptoms of decadence can be understood as resulting from the hypertrophy of those very traits that defined the West: primitivism, emancipation, self-consciousness, individualism, and so on. What appear as motors for cultural development can, when pursued ruthlessly and without regard to other virtues, degenerate into engines of decadence and decline. Mr. Barzun devotes the last sections of his book to showing how decadence has triumphed in various facets of modern life. There is, first of all, the spiritual paralysis that results from willing contradictory things. These days, Mr. Barzun observes, "any doctrine or program that claims the merit of going against common sense has presumption in its favor."

> Western nations spend billions on public schooling for all, urged along by the public cry for Excellence. At the same time the society pounces on any show of superiority as elitism. The same nations deplore violence and sexual promiscuity among the young, but pornography and violence in films and books, shops and clubs, on television and the Internet, and in the lyrics of pop music cannot be suppressed, in the interests of "the free market of ideas."

The confusion generated by such contradictions attends every aspect of cultural endeavor. In the arts, it leads to the rise of anti-art, embodied on one side by the nihil-

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istic pranks of Marcel Duchamp, on another by Picasso, who devoted his immense talent to creating an art that raged against and competed with nature. When the composer Pierre Boulez said that he was bent on "destroying everything," he merely gave voice to a current of feeling that has animated a great deal of "advanced" art since Rimbaud articulated the doctrine of the "dérèglement de tous les sens" in the nineteenth century.

The transformation of art into anti-art could not have succeeded on its own. It required the collusion of institutions that certify artistic achievement as well as the audience whose interest ultimately sustains it. Mr. Barzun is right that "When people accept futility and the absurd as normal, the culture is decadent." But futility and absurdity only seem normal to a damaged sensibility. That damage has been wrought by a progressive loss of resistence to humbug. One then becomes susceptible to all manner of cultural viruses. This lowered resistence has affected critics, teachers, and connoisseurs; it has led to a situation in which scholarship is "the pretentious garbed in the unintelligible." It has also affected the public at large, whose healthy rejection of absurdity one used to be able to count on. No more. As Mr. Barzun observes, "One notable death that occurred in the Great War has gone unsung, indeed unrecorded: the death of the philistine."

> By 1920, any that survived had been miraculously transformed, not into esthetes but into trimmers and cowards. To this new breed anything offered as art merited automatic respect and grave scrutiny. If a new work or style was not easy to like, if it was painful to behold, revolting, even, it was none the less "interesting." Half a century later *unless* the reviewer finds it "unsettling," "disturbing," "cruel," "perverse," it is written off as "academic," not merely *un*interesting but contemptible.

The stolid bourgeois used to aid culture by resisting it; by the late twentieth century, he had been transformed into a "docile consumer" for whom the avant-garde achieves "the status of a holy synod."

Of course, it is not only in the realm of culture that confusion reigns. The realms of social relations and politics are equally beset. One result is what Mr. Barzun refers to as the "Great Switch," "the reversal of Liberalism into its opposite." If Liberalism originally "triumphed on the principle that the best government is that which governs least," today "for all the western nations political wisdom has recast the ideal of liberty into liberality." The universalization and extension of the welfare state has nurtured a culture of entitlement. What began in an access of largess ends in an explosion of regulation and hectoring scrutiny. Motives that had once encouraged unity and social comity—emancipation, self-consciousness—now act as centrifugal forces: forces of decadence. By the late twentieth century, Mr. Barzun notes, "the ideal of Pluralism had disintegrated and Separatism took its place." We see its effects everywhere from college campuses to Bosnia and what we used to call the United Kingdom.

Although the picture Mr. Barzun paints is one of cultural desolation, he nevertheless manages to end on a note of cautious optimism. Even if present trends continue and society becomes more routinized and culturally sterile, human ingenuity can surely be counted upon to precipitate a rebellion against the spread of bureaucratized futility. Sooner or later, some few intrepid souls will turn with new curiosity to the neglected past and use it "to create a new present," discovering along the way "what a joy it is to be alive." The forces of decadence that Mr. Barzun describes are formidably potent. But decadence is no more inevitable than progress. Myopia is perennial, despair a temptation to be resisted. One never knows what reparations await the touch of fresh energies. Eugène Delacroix put it well: "Those very ones who believe that everything has been said and done, will greet you as new and yet will close the door behind you. And then they will say again that everything has been done and said."

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A hero of culture

by Joseph Epstein

In *The Tragic Muse*, Henry James has a character, a Mr. Carteret, of whom he writes, "Life, for him, was a purely practical function, not a question of phrasing." For James, life was not entirely but in good part precisely a question of phrasing. Phrasing is the crucial art of capturing experience in the net of words. Over the course of a lifetime, James wove the most finely meshed net in all of Anglo-American literature. He required such a net, for he was, from the very beginning, out to capture the most subtle of human experiences.

"I take for granted the maximum attention," James wrote, apropos of the intricacy of his own fiction. Blink in a Henry James novel and you may well have missed its meaning. He knew what his novels and stories required, and knew, too, that it was in the possession of fewer and fewer readers. He wrote to William Dean Howells in 1902:

> The *faculty of attention* has utterly vanished from the general anglosaxon mind, extinguished at its source by the big blatant *Bayadère* of Journalism, of the newspaper, the *picture* (above all) magazine; who keeps screaming "Look at *me*, *I* am the thing, & I only, the thing that will keep you in relation with me *all the time* without your having to attend *one minute* of the time."

Luckily for his blood pressure, James died well before the spread of radio, let alone the invention of television or the rise of the Internet.

Not everyone had, or was willing to pay, the kind of attention James's fiction asked, including his brother William. After allowing the success of *The Golden Bowl* in its line, William wrote to Henry suggesting he try another line:

> But why won't you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style? Publish it in my name, I will acknowledge it, and give you half the proceeds.

To which Henry replied:

> I mean (in response to what you write me of your having read the *Golden B.*) to try to produce some uncanny form of thing, in fiction, that will gratify you, as Brother—but let me say, dear William, that I shall greatly be humiliated if you *do* like it, & thereby lump it, in your affection, with things, of the current age, that I have heard you express your admiration for & that I would sooner descend to a dishonoured grave than have written. Still, I *will* write you your book, on that two-& two-make-four system on which all the awful truck that surrounds us is produced, & *then* descend to my dishonoured grave.

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Philip Horne's excellent *Henry James: A Life in Letters* excerpts the relevant passage from William James in this exchange and the full letter in which Henry James's response was written.[1] Although Mr. Horne prints 296 of James's letters (half hitherto unpublished) in 566 pages, in a thick and well-made book, his is nonetheless a work of great editorial economy. Henry James is thought to have written somewhere in the range of forty thousand letters, roughly twelve to fifteen thousand of which are said to have survived. (Greatly mindful of privacy, James burned a vast quantity of his correspondence at his house in Rye in 1910.) Leon Edel, James's principal and still best biographer, brought out a four-volume edition containing eleven hundred letters, and before that, in 1920, Percy Lubbock brought out two volumes containing 403 letters. The University of Nebraska Press in 1997 announced a *Complete Letters of Henry James*, in thirty volumes to be finished in 2013. That's a lot of mail.

Less, despite the thumping platitude of the modern architects, is not always more. But sometimes more is simply too much. The 296 letters in *Henry James: A Life in Letters* will give any reader a strong sense of James as one of the extraordinary epistolarians of his own or any other age. Philip Horne has printed all the most significant of James's letters in this volume. All that is missing is sustained evidence of James as one of finest writers of that most difficult of all letters to write, the letter of condolence. Evidence of his skill here is amply on display in Leon Edel's four volumes of James's letters, where James invariably writes to the bereaved with the most perfect, the most exquisite tact, delicacy, and truthfulness. It's an art, a minor but distinctly and immensely difficult one.

When I say that Mr. Horne's book is a work of great economy, I mean that, by careful selection of James's own letters and by intelligently excerpting from other of James's letters as well as from those sent to him, he has been able to provide the broad lineaments of James's remarkable career, giving a strong sense of his quotidian as well as his artistic life, without forcing the reader to suffer the thick-fingered interpretations of Henry James critics—as sibling rival, as repressed homosexual, as disappointing because cowardly heterosexual lover—that have come to the fore in recent years. One is not against interpretation—never that—only down on coarse ones. Besides, great writers make a mockery of easy interpretations, and Henry James was a great writer. A book such as Philip Horne's, which provides the letters to allow one to make one's own interpretation, is much more welcome.

Especially, let me add, when the editor is as graceful, useful, and sensible as Philip Horne. His footnotes—not endnotes, but actual footnotes, appearing at the bottom of the page—are clear, uncluttersome, scrupulous in never pretending to omniscience: "I have not been able to identify the Helen in whose marriage Lady Lovelace believes," he writes in one. But there is very little that he has not been able to identify, elucidate, and otherwise gently aid the reader's understanding with, in the way a genuinely superior editor ought to do. Horne's brief connecting passages between letters are lucid, lively, never calling undue attention to themselves or to himself. Best of all, he supplies a six-page glossary of foreign words and phrases, most of them French, that James used in his letters. For those of us who are, as I think of myself, sesquilingual—possessors, that is, of one-and-a-half languages—and speak a kind of kitchen French, this is most helpful, for James's French was of a high order of subtlety and always used to perfect effect. How many readers, for example, knew that the word "*Bayadère*" in my second paragraph means "dancing girl"? I learned it only by consulting the helpful Mr. Horne.

How did Henry James acquire his mastery of French—and also, evidently, of Italian? Of the mastery itself there is no

1 *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, edited by Philip Horne; Viking, 668 pages, $35.

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doubt. "French people have told me," Edith Wharton reported, "that they had never met an Anglo-Saxon who spoke French like James; not only correctly and fluently, but —well, just as they did themselves; avoiding alike platitudes and pomposity and using the language as spontaneously as if it were his own." The young man who was never much of a student—a flop at the technical training school he was sent to as a boy in Geneva, he later failed to complete a full year at the Harvard Law School—not only learned but also brilliantly mastered those things that he needed. ("Genius," he has one of his characters say, "is only the art of getting experience fast, of stealing it, as it were.") Acquisition of language was part of James's plan to internationalize himself. He wished to produce stories in which the reader could not know if their author was English or American. His ideal year, he wrote to Theodore Child, a London journalist, "would be 5 mos. of London, 5 of Italy (mainly Rome), a month for—Paris & a month for the imprévu."

"It is the final consummation of an American," T. S. Eliot wrote of James, "to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become." James did not do this in any slavish way, hoping to eradicate the American in himself. He it was who warned that "it's a complex fate being an American, & one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe," by which he meant the tendency of Americans to overvalue and thus be cowed by European culture. He may have thought American culture thin, as he made plain in his study of Hawthorne, but not so the brightest Americans. "To be an American," he wrote to his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, "is an excellent preparation for culture," adding: "We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than [any] of them we can deal freely with forms of civilisation not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it." Still, cultural environment was not negligible. Emerson's "perception of art," he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton, "is not, I think, naturally keen; & Concord can't have done much to quicken it."

Europe was the name of his desire, and European he became, to the point of even looking European. More than one person commented on this. "As time went on he grew less and less Anglo-Saxon in appearance and more Latin," Edmund Gosse noted. "I remember once seeing a canon preaching in the Cathedral of Toulouse who was the picture of Henry James in his unction, his gravity and his vehemence." Theodora Bosanquet, who took dictation on her Remington typewriter of the novels of his major phase, wrote of James that

> he had reacted with so much success against both the American accent and the English manner that he seemed only doubtfully Anglo-Saxon. He might perhaps have been an eminent cardinal in mufti, or even a Roman senator amusing himself by playing the part of the Sussex squire. . . . He might very well have been a merciful Caesar or a benevolent Napoleon, and a painter who worked at his portrait a year or two later was excusably reminded of so many illustrious makers of history that he declared it to be a hard task to isolate the individual character of the model.

From the first, beginning with Balzac, James took European writers for his literary precursors. In his early twenties, he thought, as he wrote to Thomas Sergeant Perry, that "deep in the timorous recesses of my being is a vague desire to do for our dear old English letters and writing *something* of what Ste. Beuve & the best French critics have done for theirs." Turgenev remained a lifelong admiration, and Ford Madox Ford reports him saying of the Russian that "for all of us who are ever so little in as you might say the know of literary values, he must always be just that, *tout court* . . . the beautiful, beautiful genius."

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Part of Henry James's distinction lies in the indubitable fact that he is, to this day, the only American novelist the scope of whose achievement is equal to that of the great continental novelists.

James first set out to be an all-purpose man of letters. He wrote much literary criticism in his early years. As a critic of visual art, he impressed no less a figure than Ruskin, who, Philip Horne notes, wished James, rather than Sidney Colvin, had become Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge. As a young man, he wrote travel pieces to pay for his own travels, and did so in sufficient quantity to produce three full volumes of travel writing. His one attempt at writing for a newspaper, when employed to produce a Paris letter for *The New York Tribune*, was a bust. When told by the editor of that paper, a decent man named Whitelaw Reid, that his copy was much "too good"—by which Reid surely meant "too much"—for the readers of the *Tribune*, James replied: "If my letters have been 'too good' I am honestly afraid that they are quite the poorest I can do, especially for the money." He later lifted that amusing sentence and inserted it in "The Next Time," his story about a novelist striving for a commercial success who could only, alas, turn out neglected masterpieces. One of the pleasing things about the literary life is that nothing is ever altogether wasted.

Able as James was as a critic both of art and literature, by his early thirties he had begun to sense that his true line was in fiction. "I've ceased to care to write about painters," he replies to an editor of the *Century Magazine* requesting an article. Criticism and journalism now became secondary, funds-raising, pure if never simple. "I find as I grow older," he wrote to William Dean Howells, who was always staunch in his support, "that the only serious work I can do is in story-spinning." Soon after, the story of Henry James's life becomes the story of his art. It is a story set in a foreground of loneliness, discouragement, and ostensible failure; it is also a story of integrity, courage, and continual development of his talent—and therefore a story of success.

Along with being a literary artist of the highest order, Henry James is a hero of culture. Heroes—in war, in science, in culture—surmount obstacles. The story of James's life is that he mastered a complex art of a kind such that, the greater his mastery, the less the world seemed to want it. Unremitting highbrow though he was, James always longed for large sales; and while he would never attain the popularity he desired, and was even contemptuous of the lumpish large public and its increasingly coarsened tastes, his own small sales—and the older and better at his craft he became, the smaller they became—were a source of bitter if amusing irony. The illustrative anecdote here is the one in which Edith Wharton arrives at James's house in Rye in one of her grand limousines, remarking that she purchased it with the royalties from her last novel. James, in response, points to a nearby wheel barrow, saying that he purchased it with the royalties from his last novel and that, with the royalties from his next novel, he hopes to have it painted.

Mastery for James did not arrive quickly. "It is always the fault of my things," he wrote to Howells, apropos of his story "Lady Barbarina," "that the head and trunk are too big and the legs too short." But then, when he let himself go, he tended to become, as he put it, too "voluminous." In 1890, he announced that "*The Tragic Muse* is to be my last long novel." His writing for the theater was no easier. Compton Mackenzie recalled James reading the stage version of his novel *The Americans* to Mackenzie's parents, who hoped to produce it; to a work already too long to begin with, he seems to have added forty further pages, so that the play took three hours and forty-five minutes to read, without intermissions. He found cutting to be absolute hell. "Yours, sir," he wrote to Bruce Richmond, the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, who requested a few cuts in James's essay on the new novelists, "is the butcher's

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trade." When he was finally done with writing for the theater, he told Edmund Gosse, "At all events I have escaped for ever from the foul fiend Excision." Yet, years later, he toyed with the notion that his play *Guy Domville* required a fourth act. Asked to write three-thousand words on a subject, he begs for four thousand, without increase of fee. "I have never been good for the mere snippet," he writes to his agent, James Pinker, "and there is so much to think and feel."

There was always so much to think and feel. He was a verbal cascade, a waterfall, a volcano of words. "My mind swarms with *effects* of all kinds," he writes to his friend Grace Norton from Rome when he is twenty-six, "to be introduced into realistic novels yet unwritten." The novels would get written, but the swarm would never cease. Characters, scenes, relationships, psychology of an intricacy never hitherto known in literature, all exfoliated for him once he began to write. Of *The Golden Bowl*, he writes to Eleanor Mead Howells, "It is *over-treated*—but that is my ruinous way & why I have never made my fortune." He once told Hamlin Garland that Howells "is an artist—always—but he has written too much, and so have I."

James was not without fame nor worldly success. But they came fairly early, and the latter left him in mid-career, when he was really beginning to come into his powers. The publication of "Daisy Miller," his story of a good-hearted American naïf abroad, brought him much press; she was considered a type, rather like F. Scott Fitzgerald's flapper would be later, and was soon much imitated in the fiction of lesser writers; a Daisy Miller hat—shades of Ralph Lauren—was even the vogue for a while. James was asked to write other stories like it, but, being Henry James, he chose not to do so. Magazines—*The Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *The Century*, *Macmillan's*, and *Cornhill's* in England—serialized his novels, bringing him (as he would say) many shekels and wide recognition.

But, then, in 1888, not yet forty-five, James writes to Howells: "I have entered upon evil days." *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casimassima*, two of the strongest novels of his middle phase, had been published without effect, commercial or critical; a third, earlier novel, the great *Portrait of a Lady*, did not do all that much better. (Published in 1882, it sold, Philip Horne reports, 5,530 copies by 1885; not disgraceful, but less than impressive when compared with the thirty-thousand copies that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* sold in 1885.) "The mysterious & (to me) inexplicable injury" this caused his reputation

> reduced the desire, & the demand, for my productions to zero—as I judge from the fact that though I have for a good while past been writing a number of good short things, I remain irremediably unpublished. Editors keep them back, for months & years, as if they were ashamed of them, & I am condemned apparently to eternal silence.

The rebuffs he suffered would have turned a lesser man away. Understanding criticism did nothing to buck him up, for the good reason that it failed to appear. A man named Horace Elisha Scudder, who took over as editor of *The Atlantic* in 1890, wrote James a letter in which he suggests he understands what the novelist is after in his delicate art. James thanks him, writing, "Have you not achieved the miracle of suspecting there may be a *meaning* in what one writes? I don't notice that any one else has!" He then sends Scudder his splendid and now much anthologized story "The Pupil," which Scudder—one restrains oneself from adding "the idiot"—rejects, noting that it is "lacking in interest, in precision and in effectiveness," comments, hindsight reveals, that apply more pertinently to Mr. Scudder's editorial judgment.

"I can stand a great deal of gold," James once only half-jokingly remarked, but when it began to look as if such as he was able to acquire would be much diminished, he turned to writing for the theater. Here was

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to be the one realm of literary composition where his otherwise excellent literary judgment failed him. "I feel at last as if I have found my *real* form," he writes to his brother William, "which I am capable of carrying far, & for which the pale little art of fiction, as I have practised it, has been, for me, but a limited & restricted substitute." He later revised this view, writing to Henrietta Reubell: "I may have been meant for the Drama—God knows! but I certainly wasn't meant for the Theatre." His play *Guy Domville* was a debacle, raucously received by a portion of its London audience on opening night. When George Alexander, the actor who played the title role, said the line "I am the *last*, my lord, of the Domvilles," someone in the audience shot back, "It's a damned good thing you are!" James described it as "the most horrible hours of my life." As author, James was dragged on stage, the booing greatly defeating the people who applauded, and, as H. G. Wells, who was in the audience, reports: "For a moment or so James faced the storm, his round face white, his mouth opening and shutting, and then Alexander . . . snatched him back into the wings."

The experience sent James into the deepest of funks. But he came back. "Thank heaven there is another art," he wrote to Miss Reubell. In a letter to Howells he described his feelings of having once again "fallen upon evil days—every sign or symbol of one's being in the least *wanted*, anywhere or by anyone, having so utterly failed." He felt a new generation was in command, and they cared not at all for him. "The sense of being utterly out of it weighed me down, & I asked myself what the future wd be." But the solution was to be found nearby—at, specifically, his desk. "Produce again—produce better than ever, & all will be well." And that is what he did, returning to fiction, entering his major phase.

The path was clear but the way far from smooth. Reviewers were not gentle with works about whose intentions they hadn't the least clue. "So much rarefied psychology, paralysis of will, and general bloodlessness has, after a time, a stultifying effect on the mind," wrote the reviewer in *The Athenaeum* of *The Awkward Age*, which was a positive puff compared to the reaction of the critic in *The Boston Evening Transcript*, who wrote of *The Sacred Fount* that "it seems insane." Meanwhile, the business manager of *The Atlantic* begged the editor not to serialize another "sinker" by Henry James, which the magazine never again did. The new editor of *Harper's*, Henry Mills Alden, offered a chance to serialize *The Ambassadors*, noted, after a terse description of the novel, "I do not advise acceptance. We ought to do better." Near the turn of the century, James told Desmond MacCarthy: "My books make no more sound or ripple now than if I dropped them one after the other into the mud."

Discouraged but not finally daunted, James never lost his subject or his main task, which was, as Joseph Conrad described it, that of an "historian of fine consciences." From the beginning his subject was the moral imagination. Writing to Mrs. Humphry Ward, he was really writing about himself: "You have the truth of the view of the interesting novel, that it's a history of our moral life & not simply of our physical accidents." He wrote out of the demands of his art, hoping that, difficult though this art was, it might be like that of Ray Limbert, the hero of "The Next Time," and turn out to be the "difficulty that inspired." At some point, Henry James must have found himself no longer caring about that larger readership, but just writing, living, like Ray Limbert, "in the country of the blue." Or at least one likes to think so.

One of his last great efforts—and, alas, disappointments—was his revisionary work on the novels and stories for the twenty-five volumes of the New York Edition of his works. He early felt the rightness of this project, and wrote to Pinker: "I have but to glance over the books to feel, I rejoice to say, how I have been a thousand times right to revise & retouch them exactly in the manner & in the degree in which I proposed to

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myself to do it." Commercially, the New York Edition was another failure; critically, it made very little stir or caused any serious adjustment in its creator's reputation.

Opinions about the purely literary success of the project differ. Max Beerbohm, who greatly valued James's art, thought the revisions a mistake, akin to "patching pale gray silk with snippets of very thick brown velvet." The prefaces that he wrote for each volume, filled though they are with good things, are sui generis, and don't quite have a life apart from James studies. Yet once he began, he could not stop. His own, always deep sense of style had become even more refined over the years. After rereading a number of stories that were to go into one of the New York Edition volumes, he told Theodora Bosanquet that "They seem so bad until I *have* read them that I can't force myself to go through them except with a pen in my hand, altering as I go the crudities and ineptitudes that to my sense deform each page."

He also once told Miss Bosanquet that "adjectives are the sugar of literature and adverbs the salt." The New York Edition was, according to this prescription, heavily salted, as one might expect from a man who could write, of an American woman who had extended her visit to him unduly, "New Yorkily conversing." In 1914, two years before his death, he told the then-young novelist Compton Mackenzie: "I wasted months of labour upon the thankless task of revision. There is not an hour of such labour that I have not regretted since."

James's rheumatic wrist caused him to begin dictating his manuscripts to typists in 1897. Mary Weld, one of his typists, said that "typing for him was exactly like accompanying a singer on the piano." But Miss Bosanquet, who became his regular typist in 1905, added: "the nervous tension of the situation when he is 'agonizing' for a word is appalling." James would apologize to friends for sending them letters on this "cold machinery," for what he called "Remingtonese," though when away he claimed to yearn to return to the "the dear old Remington tick." To what extent composing by dictation helped form his later, more circumambulatory style cannot be known, but it was probably not inconsiderable. James told Miss Bosanquet that he thought the gain in expression through dictation was worth the loss in concision.

Failed though at time James must have thought his career, among people who knew he was always considered an eminent figure. "He had great individuality," Arnold Bennett noted. "And there was his enormous artistic prestige, and his staggering technical skill in the manipulation of words." Henry James's humor dazzled. It was, as Hilton Kramer wrote in connection with his travel writing, "a precision instrument"; it was "a sly humor, that is never vindictive or condescending but, on the contrary, the exact correlative of the experience it recounts." Perhaps no more economical example of this humor in action was his response, recorded by Edith Wharton, to a pornographic novel, which Mrs. Wharton had found "not nearly as bad as I expected," to which James replied: "Ah, my dear, the abysses are all so shallow." His humor worked just as well at a higher pitch, as when, in the *plus ça change* department, he lashes out at the

> very definite & *special* craze of the day, the ridiculous abandonment of all proportion & perspective in the worship of the *actor & actress*, the deification of their little 3rd-rate personalities, the colossal inflation of them by the gigantic bellows of the Press—which in our English-speaking countries, the total absence of dramatic authors (worth speaking of) contributes to by establishing no measure of their relativity, their merely servile office.

Violet Hunt said of James that "nobody ever bored him." The only thing that did was politics, especially in its reformist aspect. He wishes John Aldington Symonds, in his attempt to make a case for homosexuality, had more humor—"it really is the saving salt. But the great reformers never have it." When Mrs. Humphry Ward

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wrote that she didn't agree with his uninterest in politics, which she found "the salt and sauce" of everyday life, James rejoined that for him "they [politics] seem to form the very measure of insipidity." When George Bernard Shaw writes to him about the uses of his plays to construct a "scientific" investigation of human beings and to bring about change, James replies that he himself writes "because I happen to be a man of imagination and taste, extremely interested in life, and because the imagination, thus, from the moment direction and motive play upon it from all sides, absolutely enjoys and insists on and incurably leads a life of its own, for which just this vivacity itself is a warrant."

He formulates this same point more memorably in a famous letter of 1915 to H. G. Wells, who wrote to him that "to you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use." "It is art that *makes* life," James responded: "makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."

Philip Horne's excellent collection of letters does nothing on either side to settle the issue over whether Henry James was a snob. Horne does quote from a letter James wrote to his friend William Henry Huntington about sending Theodore Child to call on him that provides a touch of anti-Semitism that is always so chilling in this otherwise deeply sympathetic man: "He is an Oxford man & a young journalist (*Pall-Mall Gazette* &c), & though a bit of a Bohemian & furthermore (on the testimony of his nose) a Jew, I don't feel as if I were outraging the sanctity of your private life." James could not quite entirely rise above the anti-Semitism of his social class, even though (in this case) Theodore Child was to become his friend and James, a Dreyfusard, could not bear the blaring and blatant anti-Semitism of his French anti-Dreyfusard friends, Paul Bourget among them.

Still, the charge of snobbery against Henry James is a bum rap. It was he, after all, who called aristocracy "bad manners organized." His true social view, I believe, is that which he puts in the mouth of Mme. Grandoni, in *The Princess Casimassima*, who says, *contra* the radical chic of the Princess:

> I take no interest in the people; I don't understand them, and I know nothing about them. An honourable nature, of any class, I always respect it; but I will not pretend to a respect for the ignorant masses, because I have it not.

One comes away from these letters, as from any consideration of Henry James's life, with a strong sense of James's abiding courage in loneliness. This most sociable of men—during the winter of 1878–79, he dined out no fewer than 107 times—this good son and excellent brother lived most passionately alone, in his own mind. When the young Logan Pearsall Smith told James he thought he might wish to write, he recorded James replying that "'there is one word—let me impress upon you—that you must inscribe upon your banner, and that,' he added after an impressive pause, 'that word is *Loneliness*.'" When Desmond MacCarthy told James that the act of writing made him feel so alone, James instructed him not to seek out a life in literature. "If it runs after you and catches you, well and good. But for heaven's sake don't run after *it*. It is absolute solitude."

Compensations there were, to be sure, and when one compares the sour old age of his friend Henry Adams to that of James's unending interest in life, one senses, as James himself did, that his being an artist had everything to do with the difference between the two men. Accounting to Adams for his own endless reactions to life, he writes: "It's, I suppose, because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility." Yet knowing that what he had set out to achieve —had in multiple cases actually achieved— was largely not understood could not but have increased James's sense of loneliness. "I

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remain, at my age (which you know)," he wrote to Edmund Gosse less than a year before he died, "& after my long career, utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable."

It would be pleasing to end here on a triumphal note, pointing out that Henry James certainly seems highly, pervasively, endlessly saleable today. In his letter to Howells about being upon evil days, he also spoke about the possibility that "some day, all my prose will kick off its various tombstones all at once." And so it long since has done. Think of the twelve volumes of his writings in the Library of America, not to speak of those thirty volumes of letters in the works at the University of Nebraska Press, of the plays and movies and operas extracted from his novels and stories, and the vast secondary literature of Jamesiana, biographies, criticism, newletters, the great gluttonous rest of it.

Henry James is today close to a household name, but it is less than certain that, in many households where it is, he would care long to linger. He was too perceptive not to know that, though his subject was major, the subtlety and delicacy of sensibility with which he attacked it in the end all but guaranteed his writing for a small audience. His is truly the difficulty that inspires, but the difficulty can be as genuine as the delight that is to be had in it for the few hundred people—can there be more than a thousand?—who stay the course to discover James's deep and enduring worth. The band of his admirers, now as then, remains minuscule, "partakers of the same repose," to quote from "The Next Time," "who sit together in the shade of the tree, by the plash of the fountain, with the glare of the desert round us and no great vice that I know but the habit perhaps of estimating people a little too much by what they think of a certain style."

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Lord Acton: in pursuit of first principles

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

Almost fifty years ago, introducing my biography of Lord Acton, I wrote: "He is of this age, more than of his. He is, indeed, one of our great contemporaries." A decade and a half later, in an essay on Acton, I described him as being "totally out of sorts with his times"—but I no longer ventured to claim him for our times. Today, almost a century after his death, he seems to me to be even more out of sorts with our age than with his. His governing passions were liberty and morality, religion and history. If he found them all defective in his age, he would have been far more dismayed by what we have made of them.

Yet it is one of the many paradoxes of this extraordinary man that today he is a hero to so many people of such different persuasions and dispositions—liberals and conservatives, libertarians and traditionalists, Catholics, non-Catholics, and non-believers. An eminent Chicago-school economist, after professing the greatest admiration for Acton, once asked me, in all seriousness, how a man so brilliant, so learned, so utterly devoted to the cause of liberty, could also be a pious Catholic. One might more justly ask how a man so averse to the postmodernist spirit of our times can continue to be published, read, and quoted—and not only his celebrated aphorism about power. There are currently four substantial volumes of his essays and lectures in print and eight books (including my own) about him. The Acton Institute, under the energetic direction of Father Robert Sirico, sponsors lectures and monographs promoting his name and ideas. And now we have the first full biography of Acton, not an intellectual biography but a conventional one.

There are good reasons why such a biography has been so long delayed, among them the reluctance of the family, until recently, to make available correspondence critical of the Catholic Church. But the main reason may lie with Acton himself, who passionately believed in ideas as the moving force in history and whose own life was so dramatic a testament to the power of ideas that it naturally lends itself to intellectual biography and commentary. The present work by Roland Hill[1] is welcome, not only because it is meticulously and comprehensively researched—Hill is an English journalist who has written a book worthy of a professional historian—but also because it fleshes out little-known details of his personal life and relationships, his travels, financial difficulties, and the like. No less important, it inspires us to return to Acton's own writings and to reevaluate a mind that is far more complicated and challenging than we may have thought.

The barest account of Acton's life helps explain one of the most curious facts about him, that this eminent Victorian (his life was almost coterminous with the reign of

1 *Lord Acton*, by Roland Hill; Yale University Press, 548 pages, $39.95.

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Queen Victoria) was even more untypically Victorian than were other eminent Victorians. In a sense, Acton was not a Victorian at all, because he was not really an Englishman. By birth, education, and disposition, he was thoroughly cosmopolitan. The Actons were descended from an old English family of squires and baronets, the estate at Aldenham in Shropshire dating back to the early fourteenth century. In the eighteenth century Sir Richard, the head of the family, converted to Catholicism, and other members of the family, also converts, sought their fortunes abroad. With the death of Sir Richard, the title and estate reverted to a John Acton who was then the prime minister of Naples. John's eldest son, Richard, married Marie, the only daughter of the Duke of Dalberg (the Dalbergs, residing in the Rhineland, held the premier dukedom in the Holy Roman Empire) and of his wife, who came of an ancient Genoan family. The Dalbergs, like the Actons, had wandered from their ancestral home, one of them becoming a nationalized French citizen during the Napoleonic Wars and a peer of France after the restoration. It was into this multinational, multilingual family that the son of Richard and Marie, John Edward Emerich Dalberg Acton, was born in Naples in 1834.

Acton's father died when the boy was only three, and his mother's remarriage brought the family into yet another, very different social milieu. Lord Leveson, later the second Earl Granville, met Marie Acton in Paris, when he was Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Whig government and his father was the English ambassador to France. (The Dalbergs, who were part of Talleyrand's entourage, and the Actons, who maintained a house in the faubourg St. Honoré, spent the "season" in Paris.) If Acton proved to be an untypical Victorian (if a Victorian at all), his stepfather was the quintessential Victorian aristocrat, a member of one of the grand Whig—and, of course, Anglican—families. The marriage was not without its tensions, for Acton's mother was a devout Catholic, as was her son, who resisted the social life and political career that his stepfather thought natural and proper.

At every point, Acton's life reflected the complexities and anomalies of his heritage. Refused admission to three Cambridge colleges because he was Catholic, he pursued a decidedly un-English course of studies at Munich under the tutelage of the eminent Catholic theologian Johann Ignaz von Döllinger; when he went to Cambridge toward the end of his life it was as the Regius Professor of Modern History. His first position was as editor of the *Rambler*, a small Catholic journal; his last as editor of the monumental *Cambridge Modern History*. As a young man, on the urging of his stepfather, he reluctantly served in parliament for one undistinguished term; later, as the friend and adviser of Prime Minister Gladstone, he entertained the hope of a cabinet post, but received instead the position of Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen, the most onerous of his duties being dining with the Queen and royal family. He was relieved of that task by his appointment (not by Gladstone but by his successor, Rosebery) to the Regius Professorship, whereupon he delivered an inaugural lecture so allusive and abstruse that reviewers complained that they could not understand it.

These are only the more superficial paradoxes and ironies of Acton's life. Others are more serious, even tragic. A pious Catholic, for whom membership in the church was, as he said, "more than life itself" (Hill describes him as a man of "childlike faith"), he found himself passionately engaged in one of the most contentious Catholic events in modern times, the controversy over the doctrine of papal infallibility; very nearly excommunicated as a result, he was spared that fate by his influential political connections. A liberal, who was as zealously devoted to liberty as to religion, he had as little in common with the laissez-faire, utilitarian mode of liberalism prevalent in his day as with the welfare-state liberalism of our own. And a historian, who was perhaps the most learned and in-

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tellectually ambitious of his generation, he is known today as the author, so to speak, of the most famous book that was never written, "The History of Liberty," and as the inventor of the aphorism (generally misquoted), "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The most dramatic, indeed climactic, event in Acton's life was his battle against the doctrine of papal infallibility. He was well prepared for that battle by his theological and historical studies in Munich, his earlier conflict with the English Catholic hierarchy over his editorship of two liberal Catholic journals, and his relationship with Granville and Gladstone which gave him a special standing at the time of the Vatican Council. And he carried the scars of that battle throughout his later life, as is evident in his falling out with his mentor Döllinger, his sense of intellectual frustration and isolation, and his failure to write what should have been his magnum opus, the history of liberty. Long before the end of his life, he began to speak privately of this work as his "Madonna of the Future," a reference to Henry James's story of an artist who devotes his life to the creation of a single masterpiece which after his death is exposed as a blank canvas.

Acton was in Rome when the Vatican Council met in 1870 and, although a layman, was influential in formulating the case against infallibility, publicizing it within the council and to the outside world, and coordinating the activities of the minority of bishops who opposed the doctrine. Papal infallibility, he insisted, was a perversion of both history and religion; it could only be supported by denying the spirit of Christianity, falsifying the history of the church, and subverting the legitimate relationship of pope and church. He delivered that uncompromising message to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In an influential English journal, he wrote:

> The passage from the Catholicism of the Fathers to that of the modern Popes was accomplished by willful falsehood; and the whole structure of traditions, laws, and doctrines that supports the theory of infallibility, and the practical despotism of the Popes, stands on a basis of fraud.

Acton never deviated from that position, even after the promulgation of the doctrine when he formally professed obedience to the church, being careful, however, not to profess belief in the doctrine of infallibility itself. He bitterly reproached those Catholics, like Newman, who had also opposed the doctrine and had then, all too easily, in Acton's opinion, submitted to the church. More serious, and far more painful, was his disillusionment with Döllinger, who refused to submit and was excommunicated. But even he, Acton believed, did not appreciate the enormity of the doctrine itself, for by objecting to it on theological rather than historical grounds, he implicitly sanctioned all the evils in the "pre-July Church"—that is, before the promulgation of the doctrine.

The shadow of infallibility hovered over Acton the rest of his life, dominating his thinking not only about the church, but also about all of philosophy, politics, and history. Before the Vatican Council he had eulogized Edmund Burke as "the law and the prophets," the "teacher of mankind," the exponent of a "purely Catholic view of political principles and of history." One can hear the unmistakable echo of Burke in Acton's defense of the South at the time of the American Civil War and in his criticism of the abolitionists for exhibiting an "abstract, ideal absolutism, which is equally hostile with the Catholic and with the English spirit"—very different, Acton maintained, from the church, which sought to "reform mankind by assimilating realities with ideals, and accommodating herself to times and circumstances."

After the Vatican Council, as Acton's judgments of Döllinger and Newman became harsher, so did his judgment of Burke. The pragmatic, accommodating, "Catholic" Burke was now rebuked for encouraging

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men to "evade the arbitration of principle," to think of politics "experimentally," as an exercise in "what is likely to do good or harm, not what is right or wrong, innocent or sinful." For Acton, Burke became the quintessential, opportunistic Whig as opposed to the principled liberal. In his notes and letters he made much of this distinction between Whiggism and liberalism. Where the Whig revered "legality, authority, possession, tradition, custom, opinion," the liberal respected only "what ought to be, irrespective of what is." The Whig believed in the "repression of the ideal," the liberal in its affirmation. "The Whig governed by compromise; the Liberal begins the reign of idea." "To a Liberal, all the stages between Burke and Nero are little more than the phases of forgotten moons."

The "History of Liberty" was meant to trace the development of this idea of liberalism. Bits and pieces of that history survive: in two lectures on the history of freedom in antiquity and Christianity, delivered in 1877 to a local historical society and published in their journal; in a score of essays and reviews on a variety of subjects in the following decades; and in his lectures on the French Revolution delivered in Cambridge in the late 1890s and published posthumously as a volume. These essays and lectures are full of brilliant analyses and insights, recondite facts, provocative assertions, and a host of references to wide-ranging and often obscure sources. It would take a corps of researchers to elucidate all of his cryptic allusions: "the greatest man born of a Jewish mother since Titus" (identified elsewhere as the German statesman and philosopher Friedrich Julius Stahl—but did Titus have a Jewish mother?), or "the most prodigal imagination ever possessed by man" (the Renaissance poet Ariosto). An industrious young historian could embark upon a career by documenting and amplifying a single one of Acton's essays, or even one of his dense paragraphs. The whole adds up to a story so complicated that it defies easy summation or generalization. And it becomes even more complicated when these lectures and essays are supplemented by the vast amount of notes that reflect not only the extraordinary breadth and depth of his scholarship, but also the boldness and passion of his ideas.

Early in the lecture on antiquity, Acton cited, seemingly approvingly, the "famous saying of the most famous authoress on the continent" (Mme de Staël) that liberty is ancient and despotism modern. He then qualified that assertion so abundantly that little was left of it. The great contribution of the Greeks was the principle of representation, government by consent. But by failing to limit the power of the sovereign people or to provide for any law superior to the lawgiver, the principle of democracy undermined the principle of liberty. "The vice of the classic State" (Acton apologized for the anachronism) "was that it was both Church and State in one. . . . In religion, morality, and politics there was only one legislator and one authority." That fatal flaw was corrected by Christianity, whose dictum, "Render unto Caesar . . ." gave to the civil power "a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged," thus laying the ground for "the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom." Civil liberty was the result of the ensuing conflict between church and state, each aspiring to absolute authority and each limited by the other. The Middle Ages furthered the cause of freedom by extending representative government, abolishing slavery, recognizing the right of insurrection, and acknowledging duties "superior to those which are imposed by man." But even before the Reformation, and still more after, the church undermined freedom when it became the instrument of the ruling monarchs. Thus the kings of Spain appropriated the tribunal of the Inquisition, and the absolute monarchy of France was built up by "twelve political cardinals." "In the ages of which I have spoken," Acton sadly observed toward the end of his lecture on Christianity, "the history of freedom was the history of the thing that was not."

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In antiquity and Christianity, Acton saw the first tentative overtures toward freedom, but only in modernity did it emerge in its true nature. Protestant sects in seventeenth-century England discovered that "religious liberty is the generating principle of civil, and that civil liberty is the necessary condition of religious." But not until the American Revolution had "men sought liberty knowing what they sought." Unlike earlier experiments in liberty, which had been tainted by expediency, compromise, and interest, the Americans demanded liberty simply and purely as a right. The three-pence tax that provoked the revolution was three-pence worth of pure principle. "I will freely spend nineteen shillings in the pound," Acton quoted Benjamin Franklin, "to defend my right of giving or refusing one other shilling." Acton himself went further. The true liberal, like the American revolutionist, "stakes his life, his fortune, the existence of his family, not to resist the intolerable reality of oppression, but the remote possibility of wrong, of diminished freedom." The American Constitution was unique in being both democratic and liberal. "It was democracy in its highest perfection, armed and vigilant, less against aristocracy and monarchy than against its own weakness and excess. . . . It resembled no other known democracy, for it respected freedom, authority, and law."

The French, unhappily, did not follow the example of the Americans. In his lectures on the French Revolution, Acton traced the course of events and the logic of ideas by which the revolution, starting with the promise of liberty, ended in tyranny and terror.[2] The two fatal flaws in this revolution were the predilection for violence, which exhibited itself as early as the attack on the Bastille, and the commitment to the idea of equality: "The passion for equality made vain the hope of freedom." Unlike the Americans, who wisely complemented their declaration of rights with a mixed constitution, the French permitted nothing to stand in the way of equality. In a passage reminiscent of Tocqueville, Acton explained the potential for tyranny in democracy:

> It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority. For there is a reserve of latent power in the masses which, if it is called into play, the minority can seldom resist. But from the absolute will of an entire people there is no appeal, no redemption, no refuge but treason.

This barebones summary of Acton's "History of Liberty" is almost a travesty of the original; it does not begin to convey the complexity and density of his lectures and essays. And the subject is further complicated by his views of history in general—the writing of history as well as the actuality of history. The audience at his inaugural lecture on "The Study of History" may have found much of it obscure, but there is no mistaking the moral fervor that inspired it and the moral burden it laid upon the historian. The historian, Acton declared, is a "hanging judge."

> The weight of opinion is against me when I exhort you [the student of history] never to debase the moral currency or to lower the standard of rectitude, but to try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong. . . . Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity.

The idea of a moral law that is absolute and immutable is a recurrent, almost obsessive, theme in his notes and correspondence. Murder is the "low-water mark," the ultimate, objective fact that carries with it the ultimate, objective moral judgment.

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2 Those who deplore Acton's failure to fulfill his potentialities as a historian sometimes overlook this substantial volume. It is all the more remarkable because it is the work not of a specialist on the French Revolution but of one for whom this was only one of many interests, and by no means the major one.

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Historians who fail to abide by this test are more culpable than the murderers, for they are imperilling history as well as morality. "History ceases to be a science," Acton warned us, if the moral currency is debased.

History as "science"—Acton did not at all mean by this what latter-day positivists do, for his science, so far from being morally neutral ("value-free," we now say), was predicated on a moral absolute. His instructions to the contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History* have been much cited and derided. The idea of a "scientific" history written by scholars so objective as to be virtually anonymous seems quixotic in itself, and it is even more so when conjoined to the idea of a universal history, which was to be not so much a history of nations as a history of ideas, an "illumination of the soul." To Acton there was nothing utopian in these ideas, for both derived from a morality that was fixed and absolute. "The inflexible integrity of the moral code is, to me, the secret of the authority, the dignity, the utility of history."

It is this view of history that lies behind the much quoted, and misquoted, maxim about power. It is not *all* power that corrupts, but power that *tends* to corrupt; and it is only *absolute* power that corrupts absolutely. Although Acton was careful to introduce such qualifications—"tends," "almost always," "in most cases," "the uncounted majority"—they are overshadowed by the passion of the idea itself:

> Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. . . .
>
> The experience of history teaches that the uncounted majority of those who get a place in its pages are bad. . . . The Men of the Time are, in most cases, unprincipled, and act from motives of interest, of passion, of prejudice cherished and unchecked, of selfish hope or unworthy fear. . . .
>
> History is not a web woven with innocent hands. Among all the causes which degrade and demoralize men, power is the most constant and the most active.

This view of history is hardly conducive either to the pursuit of liberty or to the writing of a "History of Liberty." One can account for Acton's failure to write that history by saying of him what he said of Döllinger, that "he knew too much to write." Or one can cite Acton's lament when he discovered that even Döllinger did not share his moral views (Döllinger having criticized the church for its "errors" rather than "crimes"):

> I am absolutely alone in my essential ethical position, and therefore useless. . . . The probability of doing good by writings so isolated and repulsive . . . is so small that I have no right to sacrifice to it my own tranquillity and my duty of educating my children.

But the problem is more fundamental still. It lies in an idea of liberty so morally rigorous, so absolute, that it could not be implemented, still less sustained, without fatal consequences.

The absoluteness of that idea is sometimes explicit, more often implicit, in his essays and lectures, but his notes carry it to its ultimate conclusion—to revolution as the culmination of absolute liberty. Liberalism inaugurated the "reign of ideas," and "the reign of general ideas [is that] which we call the Revolution." So too, the liberal theory of history, which requires that "what ought to be" take precedence over "what is," implies nothing less than a "revolution in permanence." His notes repeat this theme again and again:

> The principle of the higher law signifies Revolution. . . .
>
> Liberalism essentially revolutionary. Facts must yield to ideas. Peaceably and patiently if possible. Violently if not. . . .
>
> The story of the revolted colonies impresses us first and most distinctly as the supreme manifestation of the law of resistance, as the

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> abstract revolution in its purest and most perfect shape.

"Revolution in permanence"—shades of Trotsky's "permanent revolution"! And shades of the French Revolution, whose degeneration from a "Republic of Virtue" into a Reign of Terror Acton so graphically described. But even as he was lauding this idea of liberty he was acutely aware of the perils of any idea so absolute.

> Government by Idea tends to take in everything, to make the whole of society obedient to the idea. Spaces not so governed are unconquered, beyond the border, unconverted, unconvinced, a future danger. . . .
>
> Government that is natural, habitual, works more easily. It remains in the hands of average men, that is of men who do not live by ideas. Therefore there is less strain by making government adapt itself to custom. An ideal government, much better, perhaps, would have to be maintained by effort, and imposed by force.

It might have been Burke who wrote this trenchant criticism of "government by idea." But then it was not Burke who was trying to write a "History of Liberty." A Burkean (or Whiggish, as Acton would say) History of Liberty would be difficult enough; an Actonian (or liberal, again in Acton's sense) is impossible—and especially an Actonian one that had lingering traces of Burkeanism. Acton's "History of Liberty" invites comparison with Croce's *History as the Story of Liberty*. If the latter was written (and published), it was perhaps because Croce had all the confidence of a philosophical idealist whose ideals were immanent in history, whereas Acton had all the *angst* of an ethical idealist whose ideals were always being violated by history.

If my Acton is a more complicated, more tragic figure than Roland Hill's, it is perhaps because any conventional biography of a man like Acton, the drama of whose life was entirely the drama of his ideas, inevitably mutes that drama—domesticates it, as it were, by placing it in the context of the more mundane aspects of life. A conventional biographer is necessarily limited in the amount of space and attention he can give to ideas as dense, convoluted, often inconsistent and ambiguous as Acton's. Yet Hill's Acton, although blander than mine, is essentially the same Acton, an Acton "out of sorts" with his age and, even more, with ours. If Acton found his contemporaries insufficiently committed to the absolute value of truth and morality, what would he have made of those in our own time who have only the most relativistic sense of those values, or, worse, of those who dismiss and deride the very ideas of truth and morality as illusory, pawns in the struggle for power and "hegemony"?

Yet Acton does speak to us today—to those of us, at least, who are also out of sorts with our times. Whatever reservations we may have about his views on one or another subject, rereading him today is exhilarating, stimulating, illuminating, and often wonderfully prophetic. Historians may quarrel with his excessively idealistic interpretation of the American Revolution, but not with the contrast he draws between the American and French revolutions. We may find fault with an absolute liberty that has, as its necessary corollary, revolution, or an absolute morality that takes murder as its "low-water mark," or a view of the historian as a "hanging judge." But a generation that has experienced the horrors of totalitarianism and the atrocities of the Holocaust can appreciate, as his contemporaries could not, the importance he attached to the principles of liberty and morality. And we may well marvel at his extraordinary prescience in warning us against evils that have become all too real—the corrupting effects of power, or the despotic implications of "government by idea," or the potential for illiberalism in movements, such as nationalism, that most liberals of his time thought entirely commendable. Hill quotes the historian G. M. Trevelyan who, in his autobiography published after World War II, confessed that

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he had found Acton "always interesting, but sometimes strange": "I remember, for instance, his saying to me that States based on the unity of a single race, like modern Italy and Germany, would prove a danger to liberty; I did not see what he meant at the time, but I do now!" (That conversation took place some fifty years earlier, well before the First World War, let alone the Second.)

Catholics today have special reason to admire Acton. If they were once discomfitted by his trenchant criticisms, not only of the doctrine of infallibility, but also of the Inquisition and a multitude of other "crimes" committed by the church, they will now find him at least partially vindicated by their highest authority. Pope John Paul II's first major address in the new millennium was a plea for forgiveness for "the past and present sins" of the "sons" and "brothers" of the church. This "purification of memory," as the pope put it, recalls Acton's insistence upon the need to restore the true history of the "pre-July" as well as the "post-July" church. Moreover, Acton's special kind of "liberal Catholicism" is much more in the spirit of John Paul II than of those who generally assume that label. Acton did not wish to alter or dilute the dogmas, rituals, or traditions of the church; indeed, he opposed the "Old Catholic" sect that Döllinger joined because it did just that. Acton's liberal Catholicism consisted in reconciling the church with science and secular learning, observing the separation of church and state, and respecting the civil and political liberties of individuals.

"I never had any contemporaries," Acton once said. He would be pleased to know how many he now has. For dissidents today, he stands as an exemplar of intellectual courage, recalling us to first principles that are even more unfashionable today than they were in his time, and challenging us to reconsider how those principles may be incorporated into the practical realms of ethics and politics.

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Thomas Kuhn's irrationalism

by James Franklin

For an insight into trends and fads in the humanities world, it is hard to improve on the Arts and Humanities Citation Index. It lists all citations in the major humanities journals—that is, an army of trained slaves keys in every footnote of every article and the computer rearranges them according to the work cited. The compilers of the index examined the records for the years 1976–1983, and issued a report on the most cited works of the twentieth century. The most cited *author* was Lenin, which speaks volumes on the state of the humanities in the West towards the end of the Cold War. But the most cited single works were, in reverse order: in third place, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*; second, Joyce's *Ulysses*; and, well in the lead, Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Interest in Kuhn's book has not waned. The Index is now online, and records one-hundred citations to the book for 1999—plus another four-hundred in the Social Sciences Citation Index. To call the tone of most of these citations reverential would be something of an understatement. It is reported that *Structure* is Al Gore's favorite book, and William Safire's *New Political Dictionary* has an article on "paradigm shift," a phrase popularized by Kuhn, which reports both Bush (senior) and Clinton being much impressed with its usefulness.

The basic content of Kuhn's book can be inferred simply by asking: what would the humanities crowd *want* said about science? Once the question is asked, the answer is obvious. Kuhn's thesis is that scientific theories are no better than ones in the humanities. The idea that science is all theoretical talk and negotiation, which never really establishes anything, is one that caused trouble long ago for Galileo, who wrote:

> If what we are discussing were a point of law or of the humanities, in which neither true nor false exists, one might trust in subtlety of mind and readiness of tongue and in the greater experience of the writers, and expect him who excelled in those things to make his reasoning more plausible, and one might judge it to be the best. But in natural sciences whose conclusions are true and necessary and have nothing to do with human will, one must take care not to place oneself in the defense of error; for here a thousand Demostheneses and a thousand Aristotles would be left in the lurch by every mediocre wit who happened to hit upon the truth for himself.

Kuhn's "achievement" was to put the view of Galileo's scholastic opponents back on the agenda. Up to his time, philosophy of science had concentrated on such questions as how evidence confirms theories and what the difference is between science and pseudo-science, that is, questions about the logic of science. Kuhn declared logic outmoded and replaced it with history.

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A caricature of his opinions is this: a science, say astronomy, is dominated for a long period by a "paradigm," such as Ptolemy's theory that the sun and planets revolve around a stationary earth. Most work is on "normal science," the solving of standard problems in terms of the reigning paradigm. But anomalies—results the paradigm cannot explain—accumulate and eventually make the paradigm unsustainable. The science enters a revolutionary phase as a new paradigm such as Copernicus's heliocentrism comes to seem more plausible. Defenders of the old order, who cannot accommodate the change and usually cannot even understand the concepts in which it is expressed, gradually die out and the new paradigm is left in control of the field. Then the process repeats. According to the summary in Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*,

> The cumulative and progressive nature of modern science has been challenged by Thomas Kuhn, who has pointed to the discontinuous and revolutionary nature of change in the sciences. In his most radical assertions, he has denied the possibility of "scientific" knowledge of nature at all, since *all* "paradigms" by which scientists understand nature ultimately fail.

As with many caricatures, one finds that the original consists of the caricature with the addition of a number of qualifications; the qualifications render the original inconsistent, and the author's subsequent denials that he had said anything so radical increase further the number of inconsistencies. One observes also that the caricature has a historical career considerably more vigorous than the original, whose qualifications would have lessened its appeal. Besides its simplicity, the caricature makes the story of science into one of the simple emotive plotlines that literary folk find so engaging. It is the story of the *Morte d'Arthur*, of the peaceable order and its aging king, their virtue undermined by internal corruption, falling to the challenge of the vigorous and bloodthirsty young challenger. The plot made Frazer's *Golden Bough* a literary hit decades before, with its stories of tribal chiefs displacing one another with extreme prejudice, and even persuaded the humanities world to take an interest in the doings of Red Deer, among whom the transfer of harems between dominant males is conducted on similar principles. Kuhn's success is also an instance of the enduring appeal of *theomachy*, a mode of explanation which worked so brilliantly for Marx and Freud, and, long before, for Homer. What was previously thought to be a continuous and uninteresting succession of random events is discovered to be a conflict of a finite number of hidden gods (classes, complexes, paradigms, as the case may be), who manipulate the flux of appearances to their own advantage, but whose machinations may be uncovered by the elect to whom the key has been revealed.

Further reasons for Kuhn's success are not hard to find. He gave permission to anyone who wished to comment on science to ignore completely the large number of sciences which undeniably are progressive accumulations of established results—sciences like ophthalmology, oceanography, operations research, and ornithology, to keep to just one letter of the alphabet. That certainly saved a lot of effort. Kuhn's theory also had a special appeal to social scientists. Political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists recognized Kuhn's picture of disciplines putting the accumulation of evidence to the background while bringing to the fore fights about theory; they were delighted to hear that what had previously been thought an embarrassment was the way it was done in the most respectable sciences. Kuhn even offered something to massage the egos of natural scientists themselves. It might seem at first glance that his claim that most scientists are drones was insulting, but there was a good reason why it was met with the same equanimity one notices in fundamentalist religious circles at the news that only 144,000 are saved. The damned may be a majority, but of course they are other people; every scientist had

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the opportunity to cast himself as a revolutionary hero of a new paradigm, shamefully ill-used by the establishment. Kuhn's rhetoric incorporated a few further successful ploys, in that "paradigm" was undoubtedly a cute technical term, as technical terms go, and the phrase "normal science" had just the right hint of superciliousness towards the worker bees who are credulously doing the hard work of science. Kuhn's work was the perfect Sixties product, and, since he managed to publish it in 1962, his success was inevitable—indeed, as the philosophers say, overdetermined.

At a more logical level, Kuhn's success depended on certain ambiguities. Even in the caricature above, it is clear how some were essential to Kuhn's plan. What does "unsustainable" mean when said of a scientific theory? In particular, is it a matter of logic or of psychology? If it means that there are a number of observed results that would be unlikely if the theory were true, then one is back in the realm of logic, of the bad old philosophy of science that studied the relation of evidence to hypothesis. Naturally, Kuhn is not keen to emphasize that direction. But if "unsustainable" is a purely psychological matter, a kind of collective disgust by a *salon des refusés* of younger scientists who simply think their elders are too smug, then it is impossible to see why it should have any standing as science. If the old theory is not broke—if its predictions are true, for example, and its explanations coherent—why fix it? Whatever there is to be said for a pure appetite for novelties in the art world, there is no scope for it in science. There, the difficulty of attaining the truth means no one is inclined to pointless exercises in throwing away pearls attained at great expense.

In his new book *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times*,[1] Steve Fuller agrees with the above analysis in only one respect. He too thinks the effect of Kuhn's book was a bad one. But Fuller is a professor of sociology at the University of Warwick, and he has the attitudes that a sociologist would predict for a Midlands professor of sociology. His complaint is that Kuhn was not nearly revolutionary enough, especially in politics. In saying Kuhn's book was the perfect Sixties product, one qualification is possibly needed. Was it sufficiently leftist? Certainly, the suggestion of the blood of old paradigms staining the water had a reddish tinge. But Kuhn gave no attention to the complaints the left wished made about the complicity of science in the military-industrial complex. It was disappointing that after all Kuhn's work in replacing the logic and philosophy of science with its history and sociology he failed to so much as mention the social effects the left wished targeted.

The villain of the piece, according to Fuller, was James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953. His "General Education in Science" program at Harvard, in which Kuhn taught, explicitly aimed to give future policy makers a broad understanding of science. In the era of the atomic bomb, Sputnik and the moon race, of penicillin, DNA, and the pill, it was clear that science had much greater social implications than had been thought only a decade or two before. Conant was one of the "action-intellectuals" who defined America's early Cold War vision, especially in the areas of science and educational policy. Central to it was the National Science Foundation, which provided large sums for basic research, of the kind that had turned out unexpectedly to be at the basis of the making of the atomic bomb (and in contrast to the kind of science directly aimed at ideologically specified technological ends, like Lysenko's biology and Nazi eugenics).

Conant's preface to Kuhn's first book, *The Copernican Revolution* (1957), linked the decline of Western Europe to its outdated humanities curricula. Yet, he thought, simply teaching humanists a little straight science had not proved effective either. Science

1 *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times*, by Steve Fuller; University of Chicago Press, 361 pages, $35.

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tends to lack a storyline or anything that engages the emotions or encourages the taking of sides. "No one admires or condemns the metals or the behavior of their salts," as he justly said. His solution was history. Carefully chosen episodes in the history of science, in early modern times before it had become too complicated, would allow the student to engage with the excitement of discovery, the "interplay of hypothesis and experiment," and the conflict of personalities and ideas. This was the plan Kuhn implemented in his own teaching, and refined in his books. As it happened, it was not an institutionally successful plan at the time. It was not exported to universities other than Harvard, and when Conant became U.S. Ambassador to West Germany, Kuhn was left undefended and in 1955 refused tenure, on the grounds that he was not an expert on anything in particular. General education for humanists at Harvard retreated to the plan of introducing them to a little real science. But the simplified-history-as-moral-lesson scheme certainly had its revenge with the success of Kuhn's book.

In one way, then, Fuller's book bears comparison with Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War*,[2] which described the CIA spending large sums of money to promote such all-American cultural products as Abstract Expressionism. Certainly, Kuhn's vision of science was as disconnected from reality as Pollock and as free from bothersome detail as Rothko, and as likely as either to contribute to civilized values. But Fuller's spin on the story makes it resemble more closely the thesis of Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain's *Acid Dreams* (1985) and Jay Stevens's *Storming Heaven* (1987), according to which the drug culture of the Sixties was a CIA plan that went wrong, and the drugs that at first encouraged the rebellions of those times, in the end undermined them by replacing politics with pleasure. Fuller's accusation is that Kuhn was a patio fauvist, a purveyor of gift-wrapped frissons to the intellectual bourgeoisie, chocolate revolutions that exist in the children's-fiction world of theories and paradigms, without import in the real world. Prescinding for the moment from the question of whether the defusing of revolutionary zeal is a good thing, the thesis itself is interesting, as is the more general thesis that postmodern and other "high theory" forms of leftism act mainly to keep revolutionaries off the streets by channeling their mental energies into endless efforts to understand the incomprehensible. Fuller does not present evidence that any particular theorist was diverted by Kuhn from the path of true socialism which he would have pursued otherwise, but he is right to point to the apolitical, or perhaps better the *faux* political, nature of Kuhn's message, both in the original and its caricature. The research community that pursues a paradigm is a political entity, in the sense that it acts to preserve itself and outmaneuver its rivals, but its talk of "revolution" is very harmless; the revolution is in the past, against the previous paradigm, and no present entities have anything to fear from it. Like the violence in a horror film, it's all virtual and it's over when you come out into the light. At least, that is the correct perspective from the outside society, though denizens of the academy who have to compete for grants and students with the powerful lobbies of rampant paradigms may take a less sanguine view.

In pursuing such issues, Fuller writes well about many matters. He is hugely well-informed about cultural theorists of the fifty years before Kuhn's book, and has many illuminating remarks on the influence of such unlikely figures as Piaget and Pirandello, the connection of paradigms with iconographic approaches to art history, the bifurcation of nineteenth-century relativism into anthropological and Nazi wings, and the like. What Fuller does not know anything about is science. Nowhere in his huge output or its bibliographies is there evidence of reading in science, much less hands-on work. Hence he can write things like "lab work in today's world would seem to be little more

2 See "Supporting the indispensible," by Peter Coleman, in *The New Criterion* (September 1999).

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than a showcase activity—perhaps, like so many tribal rituals, done *primarily* for the benefit of the spectators." Fuller would be well advised to take a break from his frenetic production of big books and spend a year as bottle washer and data analyst in a lab. Perhaps he would find that the logical techniques he uses himself to evaluate the impact of one cultural theorist on another also work in the lab to allow the scientist to know the reaction of one chemical with another. It is unlikely he will take this advice. In fact, he revealingly explains how he has inoculated himself against any such suggestions. Commenting on some other philosophers of science who did spend time in a laboratory, he writes, "Interestingly, no one ever seems to have left his apprenticeship *less* committed to the science in question than when he entered." Many would take this to be indeed an interesting fact, perhaps suggesting that normal human beings find what goes on in labs quite convincing, when they take a close look. Fuller's unthinking use of "interestingly" to express a presumption that what is generally believed *ipso facto* deserves suspicion places him dead center of the post-Sixties generation of "tenured radicals."

It is Fuller's typicality that makes him a valuable witness to the one aspect of Kuhn's legacy that he does agree with, one that has been the most lasting from the point of view of science studies. To the bewilderment of scientists, that field has almost universally followed Kuhn in his substitution of history and sociology of science for logic and philosophy. In particular, the explanation of why some change occurs in science, such as the belief in Copernicus's system replacing belief in Ptolemy's, is required to be in terms of social causes, such as the interests of patrons. This mode of explanation is contrasted with that which refers principally to the better support by the evidence that a later theory has. The contrast in styles of explanation was the crux of the recent "science wars," where books such as Paul Gross and Norman Levitt's *Higher Superstition* (1994)[3] and Noretta Koertge's collection, *A House Built on Sand*, vigorously attacked the "social contructivists," Kuhn's successors, for "relativism." If science was "constructed" at the whim of powerful interests, could it not be just as easily constructed some other way, and thus be "relative" (to one's tribe, education, or community committed to a paradigm)? And would that not be to deny scientific truth entirely? As Richard Dawkins, the biologist noted for his "selfish gene" theomachy, wrote, "Show me a relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you a hypocrite." Fuller reveals why this line of reasoning is not making much impact. He, like other constructivist respondents, merely says that constructivists did not deny scientific truths, or assert relativism. Fuller calls his position a "non-relativist constructivism." By this he means that usually different scientists *will* come to agree on what they say about reality, but that the reason for this is not in reality but in the scientists, in particular in their social relations. Human groups have many things in common, so they will naturally agree on many things.

Taking this line, which is an explicit version of what many humanists are doing when they think briefly about science, requires two remarkable argumentative leaps. The first is simply ignoring the critics' argument that constructivism left its adherents no reason to believe any of the deliverances of science, such as those concerning the effects of actions at 30,000 feet. This problem is not resolved by making one's constructivism "non-relativist." If beliefs are fixed by the political requirements of communities on the ground, that gives no reason to trust them at 30,000 feet. The second leap is more insidious and important, and here Fuller makes explicit, for once, the actual *reasoning* that lies at the bottom of the turn to historical and sociological explanation. Since the move to such causal explanations and away from logic is at once so crucial, so baffling,

3 See "When reason sleeps," by Roger Kimball, in *The New Criterion* (May 1994).

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and so rarely argued for, it is worth attending to his presentation. It occurs in his earlier book, *Philosophy of Science and its Discontents* (1989). His argument—actually, he calls it "a few homely observations," which will put fallacy watchers on high alert—is that "knowledge exists only through its embodiment in linguistic and other social practices"; these in turn are transmitted by communities, and it is hardly likely that a world-view or even a proposition could persist through this transmission. Indeed, Fuller argues that, even if scientific theories were true, they could not cause reliable transmission of themselves.

This argument is the central plank of the social constructivist position. It is also at the center of the shift from logic to history that Kuhn argues for. Although extraordinarily popular, it is a very bad argument—so bad that the philosopher David Stove named it the winner of his "Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World." It will be familiar to anyone who has studied philosophy: "We can know things only insofar as they fall under our conceptual or linguistic schemes; therefore, we cannot know things as they are in themselves." In other words, our knowledge is fatally flawed just because it is *our* knowledge. This is an argument that has underpinned many irrationalist programs in the history of thought, from classical idealism to the cultural relativism supported by some anthropologists. It is clear why Fuller's argument is a version: he says "We can know things only via causal (social) processes acting on the brains of real scientists, therefore the content of our theories is fully explained by the social factors causing them; that is, we cannot know things as they are in themselves." It says, in the philosopher Alan Olding's telling caricature, "We have eyes, therefore we cannot see." This is why no amount of raging about relativism, skepticism and truth is going to make any impact on constructivists. They will always say, "Those entities in Platonic worlds, like truths and theories, cannot cause belief in themselves. Scientists are *people*, after all, and as such are responsive only to social or similar causes."

Is it clear what is wrong with this argument? If not, an analogy may help. An electronic calculator implements the laws of arithmetic. If we ask why the number 4 is displayed when we punch in 2 + 2, then there is a causal explanation in terms of the circuitry. At a molecule's eye view of the matter it is a complete explanation. But a full explanation must mention the abstract arithmetical fact that 2 + 2 *is* 4, and that the circuitry has been designed exactly to track such facts. It is not as if numbers magically cause electrical effects, but that physical causes and abstract reasons cooperate. It is the same with scientists and the truths they discover. The truth of the inverse square law of gravity is an essential part of the explanation of why that law is believed. For one thing, its truth is what makes true the measurements that provide the evidence for the theory. Of course, there needs to be some philosophical story about why causes cooperate with reasons, as there does in the case of the calculator. But the point of Kuhn and his followers was not to request such a story, but to argue that it must be irrelevant to explaining scientific beliefs. The worst effect of Kuhn, and the one taken up both most unthinkingly and most forcefully across the whole range of disciplines he influenced, has been the frivolous discarding of the way things are as a constraint on theory about the way things are.

It would be good to conclude by recommending a short book, *What Is Science?*, that does things the right way. It takes a robustly objective view of the relation of evidence to conclusion, explains what laws of nature are, briefly shows how measurement, data, statistics, and mathematical models work in science, states which parts of science are well-established and which not, illustrates with engaging episodes in the history of science, and ends with some colorful rudenesses on postmodernist solecisms concerning science. Unfortunately, it does not exist.

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Poems
by Robley Wilson & Sarah Ruden

Alone in the house

It is a bleak morning
with a wind, and under
the wind I hear drum
the motors of trucks.
Not along this street,
but on streets running
all over town and all
over the earth. Trucks
grumble in their gears
with our burdens—mail,
milk, garbage, parcels,
and dry-cleaned suits.

Only wind comes to
the house this morning.
My mind is in and out
of the picture window,
the black cat is asleep
looking dead on the rug,
the invisible trucks
drum. If I pet the cat
he will make a sound
in his sleep like hinges,
make the morning open
and arrivals commence.

—Robley Wilson

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To my dear parents

In a new house
I live alone.
My mother and father
Both are gone.

They are cancelled by
Electric words
And classed as something
I once heard

From a woods now buried,
From a sky now full.
Where are my parents
And their hard will?

How huge and fiery
These years have grown,
To make them nothing!
All I have known

Since then is God's—
This conflagration,
The horror of
His dispensation.

Command or comfort
I have not heard,
But see—burned in my tongue,
These must be His electric words.

—*Sarah Ruden*

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Things

I have respect for bricks and kitchen shelves:
So patient, asking nothing for themselves.
I never heard one shout in someone's face,
Or mutter, "Um, excuse me—that's my place."

I think I'd make a better garden spade
Than person. Mine is conscientious, staid
And competent. Nobody ever said
To it, "Do as you like—you always did."

The centuries this bottle cap could last!—
When I am centuries within the past.
Shoes, tires could crush it, but it is too strong
To think of getting crushed until it's gone.

These objects really should be using me
With their pure-hearted, calm sobriety.
What can I do with them? And who am I
To make then watch me paint my nails and cry?

—*Sarah Ruden*

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London journal

The little brass gods

by John Gross

An average evening of British television. Seeking respite from the sitcoms and soap operas, you turn to the main BBC channel, where there is a documentary about blindness in India and new methods of curing it. A serious subject: properly handled, an interesting and moving one. The only trouble is that there are a pair of narrators, two actors who can normally be seen in a popular comedy series. They lard the commentary with specimens of their humor; to set the tone, they start off with a series of jokes about Indian lavatories. But then the title of the program should have been enough to warn one—*Back Passage to India*. E. M. Forster would not, I think, have been amused.

Perhaps the only noteworthy thing about this item is that nobody in the year 2000 thinks it worthy of note. It is all in a day's work.

But let us leave such disagreeable matters and turn to the pleasant town of Chichester, in the depths of Sussex, some sixty miles southwest of London. Chichester is a small place, but it has a long history, going back to Roman times. It is dominated by a soaring medieval cathedral. There is an attractive picture of the amateur musical life which once flourished there in John Brewer's excellent study of eighteenth-century English culture, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1997). And over the past forty years or so it has been home during the summer months to an annual theater festival.

The first director of the Chichester Festival was Laurence Olivier, and its early productions paved the way for his work at the National Theatre. Since those days it has become a more provincial affair: it draws its core support from the surrounding region, and it is closely integrated into the life of the local community. (The wife of the present bishop serves as a voluntary usherette.) Audiences tend to be prosperous and predominantly middle-aged, and most of the plays presented are fairly safe—Wilde, Shaw (the less demanding pieces), Coward, an occasional Maugham or Barrie, restoration comedy, "lost" musicals, boulevard favorites such as *The Heiress*. There are newer plays, too, some of them more challenging, and the occasional adventurous choice among older works: a few years ago, for instance, there was a fine production of Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* (which is often assumed to be unstageable). Still, it is fair to say that, by today's standards, the menu is markedly conservative.

In a world where so little of the old upper-middlebrow theater survives, this is not without its attractions. A visit to Chichester can be very agreeable; and surely we can afford at least one sanctuary where we are safe from Brecht or Beckett. At the same time, I must admit that some of the dishes served up are stodgy. There would certainly be room—there usually is—for a little judicious improvement.

What the festival is about to undergo,

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however, is something altogether more drastic. A new management has announced that the time has come for sweeping changes. For a start, in an otherwise conventional season, it will be presenting *The Blue Room*, David Hare's modernized downmarket version of Schnitzler's *Reigen* (*La Ronde*)—famous as the play in which Nicole Kidman took off all her clothes. After that it hopes to stage *Shopping and Fucking* and *My Night With Reg* (a play about AIDS—a rather good one, let it be said).

Will audiences be "upset," which is what the management says it hopes? Possibly, although experience suggests that even if they dislike what is being put in front of them, most of them (as the management no doubt also hopes) will meekly submit. Will the bishop disapprove? Perhaps, although you never know where you are with bishops these days. (In a recent speech the Archbishop of Wales, after decrying the entertainment industry's unromantic treatment of marriage, held up Homer and Marge in *The Simpsons* as a golden exception.)

Whatever reactions it prompts, the changing of the guard at Chichester underlines two truths about contemporary culture at large. First, the modernizing machine devours anything which doesn't fit in with its own values. No corner where an older order lingers on can be left unmolested—not least because molesting it will establish someone's reputation for fearless radicalism. Secondly, the salutary shocks that the new order is supposed to deliver are far more likely to be social or cultural than directly political. They primarily involve the violation of verbal, sexual, and behavioral taboos (or what a dwindling group of people still think of as taboos), along with such related phenomena as the sanctification of drugs and the glorification of rock music.

And there is a third consideration, a further development for which Chichester is not ready yet—although the choice of a play (or a title) like *Shopping and Fucking* points the way. Once upon a time the fruits of living in an age of liberation were variously supposed to be life more abundant, deeper insight, intenser feeling, "love's coming of age." Some of these goals may sometimes have been attained by some people: life is complicated. And none of us, I take it, want to go back to the intolerance of the old days. Yet it is often hard not to feel, looking around, that the principal beneficiaries of liberation have been the little brass gods of coarseness and vulgarity.

Vulgarity! The word may not have been proscribed, may not be formally "incorrect," but to use it is to lay oneself open to charges of suburban snobbery and thin-blooded gentility, and to more ridicule than most of us are willing to bear. It is a word on the way out. And yet the more antiquated it becomes, the more tempted I am to recall what Matthew Arnold said about philistinism: "We have not the expression in English. Perhaps we have not the word because we have so much of the thing."

Consider, once again, the BBC. A young woman called Sara Cox recently took over as presenter of the corporation's big morning radio program, *The Breakfast Show*. Her arrival was heralded by a nationwide advertising campaign: it was hard to escape the posters announcing that "Sara Cox is going to bed early for Britain." There were also numerous interviews in the press, such as the one in which she revealed that "my boobs are in hibernation right now." And after her first broadcast, she confided to a tabloid that "it was like losing my cherry. I was very nervous about it beforehand but now I'm gagging for more."

One grieves for the BBC, because of its great traditions; and one is especially irritated by its more oafish antics because they are paid for out of public money. But things are naturally no rosier on the commercial side of the street. It is on one of the commercial television channels, for instance, that a comedian named Graham Norton has won a huge following over the past year or two with a show which features such stunts as thrusting a see-in-the-dark camera down the trousers of a member of the audience and taking live footage of his penis.

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Infantile, is it not? But endorsement comes from on high. The show was recently graced by a guest appearance from a cabinet minister—"Mo" Mowlem, the most popular member of Tony Blair's administration and his first choice (she was wise enough to refuse) as Labour candidate for mayor of London. In the course of the program she confirmed, and quite possibly enhanced, her "street cred" by telling a joke about a clitoris.

Local commentators often discuss coarseness as though it were a uniquely British phenomenon. In reality, of course, every culture has its grimy underside. But at least we can say that British coarseness has its distinctive accent, or variety of accents; that they are dismal accents, for the most part, and doubly dismal when they are parroted by the upper echelons of the media, when they don't even come naturally. A few weeks ago, for example, there was a big to-do when it was announced that the actress Kathleen Turner would be appearing in the nude in a West End dramatization of *The Graduate*—and nowhere was there more drooling than in the quality press. Virtually every article in a quality paper which I came across felt obliged to use the favored idiom of the moment (with echoes, to my ears, of football hooliganism) and talk about the actress "getting her kit off." The most widely read serious paper in the country went one better and said that she would be revealing "the wobbly bits."

Much of this crudeness is of no special significance; it is simply the way people are, the way they have always been. But some of it is part of the mood music against which a good deal of public life is now conducted. The most popular British film at present, for instance, is called *Kevin and Perry Go Large*. Every account I have read of it, including the admiring ones, suggests that it plumbs the depths of adolescent sex, drugs, and bodily-function humor. Oh well, boys will be boys. But boys have political opinions, too, and when the star of the film showed up at the premiere he was wearing a suit covered with the slogan "Vote for Ken"—Ken Livingstone, who was running as candidate for mayor of London at the time.

Nor is this an isolated case. As far as is known, the largest single financial backer of Livingstone's campaign was a radio personality and funny man called Chris Evans, who has played a major part in helping British broadcasting in its downward plunge. Another of his prominent supporters—another comedian, really—was Tracey Emin, who donated artworks to an auction on his behalf (along with the inevitable Damien Hirst and the perhaps less inevitable Sir Anthony Caro).

And now Livingstone is mayor for the next four years, with consequences which are no less depressing for being unpredictable. True, for the moment many observers are consoling themselves with the thought that the joke is on Tony Blair, without whose bright ideas and miscalculations the situation would never have arisen. But it is a joke which the rest of us are going to have to live with.

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Theater

Waddling toward the edge

by Mark Steyn

I had an odd post-theater experience the other day. Returning to my New York hotel room, I switched on the television to see David Letterman trailing an appearance by the cast of the multi-Tony-nominated *Kiss Me, Kate*. It's not often you see any theatrical excerpts on the small screen, though it used to be quite common: Ed Sullivan felt it was only natural that his show should include pocket-sized productions of Broadway hits. But, although Letterman's "Late Show" is broadcast from the Ed Sullivan Theatre, CBS is not so insane as to let him keep up the old traditions. So I decided to stay up for *Kiss Me, Kate*. In the commercial break, there was a Gap ad: if you haven't seen this latest campaign, it uses the score of *West Side Story* and posits a rivalry not between Sharks and Jets but between rival gangs of Jeans and Khakis, or wearers thereof—they being the retail giant's two big sellers. So, for thirty seconds, Bernstein's definitive jittery urban riffs wailed across the air, the Khakis (in this case) rumbled, one in their midst emerged to sing, finger-snappily, the final line: "Just play it cool, boy. Real cool." And then the tag: When You're A Khaki.

Two minutes later, Letterman introduced the cast of *Kiss Me, Kate* to sing "Too Darn Hot." And about thirty seconds into "Too Darn Hot," I realized I preferred Gap "Cool." I don't shop at The Gap; unlike my fellow scribe Andrew Sullivan (of *The New Republic*), I've never been invited to model their chinos on bus-side posters. But it seemed to me that The Gap had caught the spirit of Bernstein far more deftly and wittily than "Too Darn Hot" had caught the spirit of Cole Porter. *Kiss Me, Kate* (at the Martin Beck) has a lot of solid Broadway expertise behind it, but it lacks a single idea, or a belief that its characters are engaged in anything other than reviving a musical. "Too Darn Hot" is a song that, in the right hands, can be as cool as Bernstein's "Cool." But in *Kiss Me, Kate* it's just been farmed out to the usual types one finds in the ensemble numbers at a Broadway revival these days: the black hipster, the sassy mamas, characters we recognize making moves we recognize singing songs we recognize, endlessly circling back and forth, raking over the same old soil until it's a dust bowl.

In my interviewing days, I always found that, if Bernstein was bored or out of it, a surefire way to get him going was to coo gushily about "the Broadway sound." "'The Broadway sound?,'" he'd sneer. "There is no 'Broadway sound.' There used to be a long time ago, before they knew they had one. But now it's all fake—the same old vamps, the same old sound. It's the sound of death. It's a corpse. A beautiful, mummified corpse," etc., etc. But the old boy was right. The notion that, down at The Gap, the Khakis and Jeans are locked in some internecine feud is, on the face of it, faintly ridiculous, but there's a hundred times more characterization, motivation and

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point of view in their thirty seconds than in the new *Kate*. Tonys notwithstanding, The Gap's *West Side Story* is the Best Revival of the season.

Cool, of a kind, is also in evidence at the Jane Street Theatre, where Eric Bogosian is giving his latest rant in *Wake Up And Smell The Coffee*, directed by Jo Bonney, the current Mrs. Bogosian. The man himself looks like a Gap ad for the middle-aged—Generation Gap, maybe: hey, there's a concept. His famous curly mop is graying at the temples, but he's trim enough to look good in black jeans and a white shirt. The question is: he's lean, but is he still mean?

Bogosian is one of the few hard men in American entertainment: he made his name with his multi-charactered monologues skewering CEOs, 'burbs dwellers, evangelists—the usual targets, but sliced and diced more viciously than usual. He also had a good eye for trends—*Talk Radio* was an early stage and screen hit. But fate plays few crueler jests than letting a man become famous for being tough and edgy. Fame makes you soft and pampered, and, although you can still just about discern the edge, it's way out there in the distance, just a hazy blur, and frankly you've no desire to waddle all the way over to remind yourself what it looks like. Railing against all the bland, plastic, phoney schmoozers has made you so successful that now all the bland, plastic, phoney schmoozers are your best friends. They tell you to relax, quit worrying about it. If Time Warner can have a subsidiary called Maverick Records and no one laughs, if all the so-called "independent" films now cost $40 million and are made by a Disney offshoot and no one scoffs, if Burger King can use as its slogan "Have it your way" and no one points out that if you were the kind of person who cared enough about food to want to have it your way you wouldn't be in Burger King in the first place, why should you get hung up on paradox? In American culture, iconoclastic transgressive uncompromising individualism has long since been smoothly annexed by the corporations, and audiences don't seem bothered.

But poor old Eric Bogosian is bothered. What's happening on stage at the Jane Street is a midlife crisis. In its own way, it's as grimly mesmerizing as the septuagenarian Carol Channing on the road in *Hello, Dolly!*, and in both cases the stars seem to have metamorphosed into their own waxworks. Of course, Bogosian is sufficiently self-aware to know that his crisis, his discomfort with his "success," is just the latest variation of the old act: "I'm so smart. In my black jeans and my righteous anger, ranting on and on about hypocrisy, pissing people off just enough to sell a few tickets," he says, with parodic self-disgust. "Always looking over my shoulder, making sure I don't lose my place in the big line. Desperately trying to preserve my modicum of success so that I can hold my head high in this giant pecking order of art and commerce and celebrity." He may no longer be "dangerous," but he's dangerous enough to let us know that he's not dangerous at all. "I toe the line. And I do it for a very good reason. I'm a sheep. I'm a gutless sheep."

But beneath this telegraphed parodic self-disgust is a palpable nervousness. Martin Amis, recalling his father Kingsley's reaction to the son's success, described it as the moment every writer dreads—the moment when someone younger, newer comes along and says, "No, it's not like that, it's like this." Take that title, *Wake Up And Smell The Coffee*: doesn't it sound, in all its urgency and impatience and in-your-face hostility, just a little passé, a little tired, a little *Eighties*? And, even in the Eighties, there were already a thousand modifications of the formula: Wake up and smell the green, and so on.

If you wake up at the Jane Street, what you mainly smell is fear. The fear of a man whose cutting edge has gone blunt. He enters as a pro wrestler: "If you don't like pain, don't even get in the ring with me." He turns into an evil Regis Philbin for his own version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" He switches to the role of a dis-

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satisfied theatergoer complaining about the incessant role switches: "You don't believe in anything; you need to have more faith." He switches to God and Jesus rapping while the latter is on the cross. God is "a capricious little fuck." Look what happened to Jesus, even though he "looks just like Willem Dafoe." (Bogosian doesn't believe in the resurrection of Christ, only the resurrection of old Lenny Bruce routines.) He does *Forrest Gump* jokes. He may be the last man on the planet doing *Forrest Gump* jokes. He does Bill Clinton jokes. But these days Bill Clinton does Bill Clinton jokes, in his ghastly after-dinner appearances at press corps galas, wearing that frightful wing collar that makes him look like the maitre d' at a nineteenth-century New Orleans bordello, and, when Clinton's doing Clinton shtick, that's a sign that the rest of us should move on. But on Bogosian ploughs. He does air travel jokes. He does jokes about businessmen who find first class is full and they have to go coach. The businessmen have cell phones. He does Starbucks jokes. He does latte jokes. He really has, it seems, just woken up and smelled the coffee.

There are odd flashes of the old form. There's the guy telling his therapist that his wife's responsible for the break-up of their marriage. He'd be out all night drinking, wrecking the car, in trouble with the cops, and what did she do?

> I'd be in the kitchen, 7 AM, puking my brains out. And she'd be giving the kids breakfast like it was nothing. Did she ever stop to think, "Poor guy. Why is he doing this to himself? How can I help him?" No, she was too self-obsessed to see it. So whose fault is that?

Not his. Or so his therapist has taught him. "One thing I've learned here is that in every couple there's two people. The level-headed one and the freak. And we both know which one I am." The therapeutic culture is an easy target, but Bogosian's scorn is at full throttle, and the character is vividly drawn, in all his woeful, therapy-insulated lack of self-knowledge.

But what are we to make of the rest of the crew? Nobodies who dream of being Hollywood celebrities. Hollywood execs who are all ego and bland fatuities. But you'd have to be a genius to wring any more dramatic mileage out of dissecting a Hollywood producer. Millions of people who've never been within a thousand miles of a Hollywood producer feel they know the type from Scott Fitzgerald, Jackie Collins, and a million other depictions. If you work for, say, H & R Block, you're more familiar with the stereotype of a Warner Brothers head honcho than an H & R Block honcho. But poor old Bogosian is poised somewhere between the loser wannabes and the Hollywood helmsmen. He is, for want of a better description, a minor celebrity, and one who can't decide whether he'd like to be a bigger celebrity or whether he'd like to go back to being the angry outsider railing at them from the cutting edge.

So he offers instead a kind of out-of-body experience: the snarling, raw Eric Bogosian observing the new, house-trained "Eric Bogosian" as he goes about auditions, fantasizes about getting fawned on in restaurants, gets vicious about Tom Hanks, bears the burden of oleaginous producers —"My wife took me to see one of your shows. Very interesting. Compelling. Really made me think." Bogosian is offering his success in mitigation: if I'm not as on the money as I used to be, it's because I'm too famous. I'm trapped in this bullshit world, so it's no wonder my slacker-hitching-on-the-Interstate routine is just a tad off-kilter.

It's a strange, unsettling evening for all the wrong reasons: you don't smell the coffee, just the fear, the fear of an observational satirist who can no longer observe so well and is blaming it on his tinted windows. I don't believe him. Bogosian is no price-of-fame victim. He's not *that* famous. On a random sample of a few dozen New Hampshirites, Vermonters, and Quebeckers, I couldn't find one who'd heard of him. That's a big chunk of the northeast right there where he could live unmolested by

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power lunches, bottled water, and curly endives. But, as he acknowledges, "I can talk the talk but I can't walk the walk."

As his dramatic climax, he offers up the new Valhalla, where the rich and beautiful frolic and gambol, while the rest of us look up enviously and wonder how we can gain access to the playground of the celebrity gods, where, instead of celestial harpists, John Tesh (the New Age keyboard drone from "Entertainment Tonight") and Puff Daddy (the trigger-happy gangsta rapper) make music in perfect harmony. "Can you see them up there? Can you see the gods? Look at them; aren't they beautiful? They're playing volleyball. There's Gwyneth passing off to Oprah . . ."

Speak for yourself, Eric. There's something pitiful about a man giving lessons in the hollowness of celebrity culture when he himself is desperately clinging to the fringes of that culture. The rest of us aren't: that's the surprising, amazing fact about America you never hear on the news. In Valhalla, the gods are immortal, but in this new Valhalla, immortality means sticking around as long as, oh, Burt Reynolds. And the interesting thing is that, despite all the babble about a "celebrity culture," the public sloughs it off with nary a thought. Oprah is the richest black woman in history; she has the biggest television show in the world; the editors of *Time*, supposedly a news magazine, thought her last movie merited a special supplement crediting her with an achievement somewhere between the discovery of penicillin and the circumnavigation of the globe.

And what happened? Nobody went to see it. All the sophistication of the global hype machine crumbled before the lowest-tech communications system of all—Kelli saying to Dee Dee, "Hey, that Oprah movie really sucks." As the late Shah of Iran ruefully put it, "Ingratitude is the prerogative of the people." "The English people need a light in their dark little tunnels," the Princess of Wales once said, with exquisite condescension. "I'll be that light." But, in their dark little tunnels, the people get by just fine, without the now forgotten Diana, without Oprah's movie, without every second or third of Gwyneth's movies, without Naomi Campbell's unreadable novel, without Sly and Arnie and Demi's belly-up hamburger chain. It only seems like a celebrity culture because Bogosian and other fringe celebrities keep going on about it. You should get out of the house, man. Go fishing. Eat at truck stops. Be a library volunteer. Whatever.

"I don't have any answers," he says. "I don't have a message. I can't make you think. I can only make you numb. Sedate you. Make painless this unending trail of shit we call a life. This tar pit of stupidity. This vat of spiritual oatmeal. This slimy snail track of frustration." Hmm. If he were in junior high, he'd be gunning down the schoolyard. But happily, like he says, he can talk the talk but won't walk the walk, and so he's part of his own self-created problem, which he persists in thinking is ours, too. Admirers of Bogosian like to hail him as reconnecting the theater with its original purpose, as seen by the Greeks: a forum for criticizing life. But, to criticize life, you've got to be out there, part of it. No matter how strong you make it or how you overbrew it, decaf is decaf.

A better meditation on modern life can be found over in London, on Shaftesbury Avenue, where Alan Ayckbourn's fifty-third play has settled in at the Lyric. Ayckbourn is, in British terms, as comfortably ensconced as Bogosian: he is now Sir Alan, and he does his thing well enough to feel no need to "keep up" with what's "going on." But his insights ring more topical than Bogosian's. *Comic Potential* starts out as so-so media satire: a "foreseeable future" where a bargain-basement regional television station pumps out round-the-clock soaps. Actors are no longer required. Instead, there are computer-programmed "actoids." This isn't even especially fantastic: during shooting of the recent film *Gladiator*, Oliver Reed expired after one last almighty drinking binge, so the studio simply used a computer-animated recrea-

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tion of him for the final scenes. In Ayckbourn's scenario, one of the actoids, JC333, develops a sense of humor. (One hopes the computerized version of Oliver Reed doesn't develop his drinking habits.)

Janie Dee gives a delightfully stiff-limbed performance, complete with a robotic smile that's alarmingly like Hillary Clinton's. The newly humorous Jacie (as she's known) attracts the attention of the television mogul's nephew (Matthew Cottle), who whisks her off to a luxury hotel. It's the umpteenth take on Pygmalion, but Miss Dee's performance is its own justification: the vacant intensity of her stare, the metallic voice unable to make small talk but only able to converse in the lurid confessional style of daytime soaps. Like Bogosian, Ayckbourn is making a point about the emptiness of our culture, and I'm not sure he isn't right to single out humor as the essential spark of human identity. As to the idea of real actors being made redundant by robots, Janie Dee's performance is the best argument against that. The play stands or falls on whether you believe Adam could really fall in love with her, and Miss Dee's humanized robot walks the line perfectly.

On the subject of actoids, it may be time to consider the acting problem in New York. Despite the fact that Manhattan is groaning under a vast surfeit of officially certified "actors," the small number who wind up in gainful employment seem increasingly to be not up to the job. I didn't see anything in New York this season approaching Jude Law's sly, subtle turn in *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* at London's Young Vic a couple of months back, before his Oscar nomination for *The Talented Mr. Ripley* propelled him into the spotlight. You can't really blame Hollywood for bypassing New York and recruiting directly from London, but it does make the American theater's bleating about "celebrity" seem even more self-pitying.

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Art

British invasion

by Karen Wilkin

British art invaded New York this spring. The three-pronged attack was mounted not by the YBAs responsible for the adolescent tantrums in Brooklyn last year, but by a group of seasoned painters, all over seventy, all with distinguished track records: Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, and Craigie Aitchison, in order of their familiarity to audiences on this side of the Atlantic. The three shows overlapped by accident rather than by design, it seems, but the coincidence probably made all of them more provocative than they would have been in isolation. Seeing recent works by Freud, Kossoff, and Aitchison in fairly close proximity offered opportunities for interesting comparisons and suggested even more interesting questions about individuality and the Britishness of British art.

Freud was last seen here in some depth in 1996, in concurrent exhibitions at Acquavella and the Metropolitan. I confess to mixed feelings about Freud's work. His recent efforts[1] (the show included about thirty large and small canvases, plus some etchings, all executed between 1997 and 2000) seemed more convincing than his earlier massive, meaty nudes, but while the works at Acquavella could fascinate, they also irritated; they demanded serious, prolonged attention, but they were frequently downright exasperating.

Freud's pictures draw you in, despite his perhaps calculated, perhaps inadvertent efforts to repulse you. His works are often so deliberately uningratiating, so unappealing to the eye, that they seem designed to push you away. It's the diametric opposite of the quality Michael Fried attributes to Courbet's pictures, which, he convincingly argues, often manifest the painter's desire to collapse (metaphorically) the distance between the beholder and what is beheld. "Bugger off," Freud seems to tell the viewer, as though what he was engaged in was so private, so difficult, and so rarefied that no one could be allowed to watch. Yet at the same time, the painter teases the viewer by offering him "forbidden" subjects: figures seen in moments of apparently artless nakedness, their unclothed and often unlovely bodies displayed unabashedly and presented without scruple or sympathy. Other contradictions: despite their apparent unguardedness, Freud's models have obviously agreed to pose, and despite their often startlingly revealing postures, they are presented—oddly—without any hint of sensuality. The effect of this fusion of revelation and denial (long a characteristic of Freud's painting) is to turn the viewer into a voyeur.

Freud's pictures often reward intense scrutiny—a recapitulation perhaps of the intense scrutiny that went into their making. At his most absorbing, he convinces you that he is engaged in a passionate quest for some kind of perceptual truth. Some of

1 "Lucien Freud: Recent Work 1997–2000" was on view at Acquavella Galleries, New York, from April 6 to May 19, 2000.

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the strongest recent paintings dwelt on the particulars of long bony limbs (human and canine), on the weight and texture of flesh, and on the blocky masses and dull colors of old furniture. But there's also that suggestion that you are looking at something that you shouldn't be and an undercurrent of nastiness and perversity. Everything seems cold, grubby, comfortless, squalid; pleasure doesn't enter into the equation. The seat of the armchair is cracked and broken; stuffing escapes from the end of a sofa. The narrow bed on which Freud poses a fleshy nude, face down, plunging vertiginously to the bottom of the canvas—one of the show's best pictures—has a sinister split in the ticking. I suppose this could be taken as evidence of a Rembrandt-like detachment from conventional notions of the beautiful or the visually absorbing, or as a lofty disregard for bourgeois materialistic values, but Freud's careful itemizing of such unsavory bits and his placing naked flesh against them smacks more of deliberate unpleasantness than high-mindedness. That impression is intensified by his signature murky palette of muddy flesh tones and dull, musty browns. (No, it isn't simply fidelity to London light; it hasn't been that yellow since they stopped burning coal.) Of course, in some circles, the sour tenor of Freud's pictures is thought to equal seriousness and importance. It's a test of the viewer. How much grot and indifference to your comfort can you take and still come back for more?

Freud's real seriousness, however, manifests itself in painting issues: the lucid, felt space, and subtly differentiated surfaces in a 1997 picture of a dark red armchair by a dull black electric fire, or the complex orchestrations of figures, furniture, and the room they occupy in *Large Interior, Notting Hill* (1998) and *Naked Portrait with Red Chair* (1999). Such eloquent, muscular articulations of the planes of chair, wall, bed, and floor come as an agreeable surprise in the work of a painter who often seems to lose interest in his pictures once he moves away from the figure. *Large Interior, Notting Hill* is notable, too, for a play of cool light; patches of sun on the floor and bed change the temperature of the room. But having engaged you with a wonderfully constructed image, Freud pushes you away, thumbing his nose at the viewer with that much discussed naked male figure nursing a baby in the middle-ground. The gratuitously shaped canvas in *Naked Portrait with Red Armchair* has a similar effect and so do the male knees peeking out from under the bed in an otherwise straightforward painting of a sprawling naked man and an equally lean greyhound. And then there are those deliberately hideous paint surfaces, the arbitrary crusts that suggest skin disease and decay.

When Freud paints heads and portraits, he is usually free of such self-conscious "bad boy" mannerisms, absorbed instead by questions of how touches of pigment can remain touches of pigment and, at the same time, conjure up a powerful sense of a thinking, feeling individual. A tiny portrait of John Richardson, the massive head escaping the confines of the canvas, was one of the most impressive works in the show. Issues of painting and perception outweighed everything else, which would have totally eliminated the exasperation factor, except for the pretentious presentation. Freud seems to have inherited Francis Bacon's role as Britain's official tough and important painter of *épater la bourgeoisie* subjects. (It can be argued that Freud's crusty paint surfaces serve the same purpose as Bacon's slapdash paint gestures and distorted drawing of heads and figures: to suggest violence done to the body.) Freud also seems to have inherited Bacon's framer. Everything in the recent show was presented in pompous frames under glass, which killed the surface of every picture. Why do this to works in which surface and touch are supposed to be major issues, unless to suggest that Freud's works, like Old Master paintings, are so precious and rare that they can't be shown unprotected? Or to mollify the owners of pre-sold pictures fear-

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ful of damage to their (expensive) possessions? So much for disdain for materialist values.

Around the corner from Acquavella, on two floors of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, works by Leon Kossoff, another master of British grot, could be seen in New York for the first time since 1988.[2] (A series of odd etchings inspired by Poussin was simultaneously on view at the Metropolitan.) Kossoff is highly regarded in Great Britain, admired, I suspect, not simply for his work, but for his place in a constellation of painters that includes his mentor David Bomberg and his colleague Frank Auerbach, all of them revered for their perceived integrity, their anxiety, and their fidelity to an effort to achieve some kind of equivalence between the physical stuff of paint and the intangibles of sensory experience. (Kossoff's process is discussed in an informative essay by Klaus Kertess in a handsome catalogue jointly published by Mitchell-Innes & Nash and Annely Juda Fine Art, London.)

The show assembled roughly equal numbers of paintings and drawings made over the past five or six years. Kossoff's current subjects are straightforward enough: heads, nudes, and cityscapes based on the gnarly urban landscape around London's King's Cross and St. Pancras Station. In the paintings, materiality is the crucial issue. Like Bomberg and Auerbach, Kossoff piles it on, loading his boards with pounds of pigment, slathering wet into wet, scraping it all down, and then starting again. What's curious is that despite all this physical manipulation of stuff, Kossoff, like Freud, seems immune to the inherent sensuousness of his material. Much of the time, Kossoff's paint, while undeniably thick, is strangely inert—like his color, his surfaces seem bleached, dry, almost dead. Maybe that's the point. No easy seduction through materiality for these tough-minded Brits. No overtly appealing subject matter either. Kossoff doesn't seem to suffer from Freud's self-conscious desire to prove how nasty he can be—he's got his own mishegoss—but he does share his taste for the unembellished, the unromanticized, and the apparently ordinary. Some of the strongest works in Kossoff's show were of that unappetizing zone around St. Pancras Station, sometimes shown complete with flyover and gasometer, and his models are no more conventionally attractive than his compatriot's. But where Freud seems to try obsessively to respond to every visible sag, pucker, and knob in a face or a body, Kossoff generalizes, especially when he paints or draws the figure, reducing the particularities of anatomy to the broadest of indications and the most generic of contours, burying nuances of form, especially in his nudes, in swoops of uninflected, vaguely flesh-toned pigment.

Kossoff's drawings, with their nervous strokes and scribbles of charcoal and their anxious erasures, are another matter. He draws the figure as if he longed to arrive at Matisse's eloquent contours but couldn't because he was afflicted with all of Cézanne's discomfort and inability to commit to a single defining line. This is not to say that even Kossoff's best drawings come anywhere near Cézanne's, but the strongest, such as the exhibition's series of male heads, seem to make and unmake themselves as you watch; they transmute indecision and searching into the human presence and bulk. Conversely, in Kossoff's least successful figure drawings, all of this agitation and cogitation dissipates itself into a surface of arbitrary events that seem to drift without ever coalescing into form. Yet in a series of charcoal and pastel drawings of St. Pancras and its environs, made in 1997, these strokes and scrawls seem fierce and urgent, reading at once as testimony to a willful act of mark-making, as graphs of intense feeling, and as distillations of the randomness, congestion, noise, and movement of London in those places where a Victorian heritage and modern life collide head-on.

Those drawings, to my eye, definitely took precedence over a series of paintings,

2 "Leon Kossoff" was on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, from April 11 to May 20, 2000.

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executed in 1998, of related subjects—the largest and most ambitious works in the show—which were devoted to King's Cross at rush hour, in different weather and at different seasons. Instead of finding them evocative of urban sensations and perceptions, I found myself trapped in their inert surfaces, their bland, muddy color, and their schematic, dumbed-down drawing. I had trouble with most of the nudes, too. In fact, in most of the paintings in the show Kossoff's drawing seemed slack, deprived of the tension that gives his works on paper such vitality, as though his responsive, insistent drawing gestures were drowned in the sheer accumulation of pigment. The exceptions, once again, were the male heads. In them, there was a real tug of war between image and material, a sense that accumulation was an equivalent for perceptions of mass and weight. In the potent little *Head of Heinz I* (1997), a faint flush of (subdued) color brought the paint to life, so that dragged mauves, ochres, and cool blues conspired to suggest massive forms. In *John I* (1998) the burden of evoking form was placed on drawing with the brush, rather than on color, but here drawing and painting were seamlessly integrated, with impressive results. Not all the heads were at this level, but they (with the drawings) presented the most persuasive evidence of why Kossoff is so highly esteemed on the other side of the Atlantic. His pictures are notoriously slow—slow to make, it seems, and slow to reveal themselves. In spite of my reservations about many of the works in the show, it became obvious that some initially problematic paintings were often better than they seemed at first acquaintance, while others remained as problematic as ever. Getting an idea of what Kossoff is about takes time. Let's hope it won't be another twelve years before New Yorkers have another chance to see what he is doing.

If the work of Freud and Kossoff represents British painting at its least idealized, most abrasive and rough, Craigie Aitchison's pictures can stand for British painting at its most intimate, charming, and good-humored. The Scottish-born painter's canvases, with their wispy drawing, delicate surfaces, fresh colors, and dream-like imagery, occupy a zone at the opposite end of the spectrum from those of his colleagues, with their gritty realism and churned, murky paint. Think *The Wind in the Willows* instead of *Look Back in Anger*. Aitchison has been acclaimed in Great Britain since he was a precocious, prize-winning student at the Slade in the early 1950s, but although his work has been exhibited everywhere from Paris to Tokyo, his recent show at Galeria Ramis Barquet was his first in the U.S.[3] The exhibition concentrated on paintings about India and Italy, made over the past two years, along with a few earlier works with related themes, as a helpful context.

For American audiences, Aitchison's faux-naïve landscapes and still lifes, his archaizing crucifixions and seascapes might be described as hybrids, say, of Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery, with an admixture of the whimsical. Like a child or a good folk artist, Aitchison pares down his subjects to essentials, turning complicated forms into telling silhouettes and shorthand drawing. But these simplified images are, like Aitchison's surprisingly orchestrated color and his economical suggestions of space, far more sophisticated than they first appear. In a series of Indian theme paintings of a fertility symbol, the Nandi bull, he reduces his experience of the subcontinent to broad frontal planes of sky and earth, interrupted by the centralized, jagged silhouette of a schematic temple, and sometimes linked by fragile, drawn trees. The bull stands in the middle, in cookie-cutter profile, decorated with playful polka-dots. Thin washes of intense, unmodulated hues suggest night skies in some of the series, blazing sun in others. In the best of them, the heat and light are palpable.

The frontality, symmetry, and bold color of the Nandi bull pictures, not to mention

3 "Craigie Aitchison" was on view at Galeria Ramis Barquet, New York, from April 11 to May 20, 2000.

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their pared-down imagery, might seem specifically evocative of India, particularly of Indian decorative and devotional painting traditions, but it turns out that they are more specific to Aitchison himself than to any single location. (They are also part of a certain aspect of British painting, a tradition that manifests itself conspicuously in, for example, David Hockney's stylized, hyper-refined figurative works of the 1960s and early 1970s.) Aitchison's non-Indian landscapes are similarly simplified, composed of flat expanses of thinly painted, but saturated hues and a horizon line. Geographical features—a mountain, an island—were reduced to near-symbols, as were boats, buildings, birds, and a crucifixion image that recurred, like a leitmotif, throughout the show's landscapes.

A good deal of Aitchison's work teeters on the edge of preciousness—some of the Ramis Barquet exhibition's tiny still lifes and landscapes were pretty slight—just as Hartley's can risk ponderousness and Avery's over-stylization. But at their best, Aitchison's paintings not only are charming, but also reveal unexpected subtleties. Many of the small Indian paintings of boats and water proved to be held together by a dynamic, intuitive placement of elements that turned schematic bands of color into lively, engaging distillations of place, while small shifts within the bands themselves turned them from applications of paint to a surface into suggestions of space. A large non-Indian seascape, *Goatfell, Isle of Arran* (1999–2000), turned brushy inflections of a blue-black expanse into ocean and cloudy night sky, not only by the placement of a big, backlit purple mountain, a symmetrical disposition of boats, house, guardian crucifix, and a scribble of gulls, but also by the presence of spontaneous-seeming but controlled passages of lighter, more luminous colors.

Engaging as many of the recent landscapes were, one of the strongest pictures in the show was the iconic, vivid *Portrait of Kunwar Singh Bagri* (1984) described as "a lift boy in a Delhi Hotel, painted during a visit to India." Here Aitchison's keen sense of placement, his ability to reduce the complexities of actuality to elegant shapes, and his delicate touch combined, along with his command of new-minted color harmonies, to create a direct, unpretentious image of a recognizable individual, a lively boy whose sensuous mouth formed the center of a deceptively simple composition, at once artless and thoughtfully constructed.

There's no doubt, Freud's reputation being what it is at the moment and the art market being what it is, that we'll be seeing his work in New York with some regularity—whenever his dealers can pry it loose from the studio. It would be good to see more of his colleagues' efforts, as well: not only Kossoff and Aitchison and their peers—although it's good to know what mature, engaged artists are doing, anywhere—but also some of the next generation. (If anyone really wants to know, I can provide a list of significant fifty-something-year-old British painters and sculptors whose work has not been seen in New York for decades.) Why should the YBA's get all the attention?

Exhibition notes

"Christopher Wilmarth:
Every Other Shadow had a Song to Sing"
at Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
April 7–May 6, 2000

Christopher Wilmarth worked in the materials of modern urban architecture: glass, steel, and cable. Though a student of the architect and sculptor Tony Smith, Wilmarth made sculptures too imbued with light, too expressive of human longing to be understood as strictly minimalist. In 1974, he wrote that he was "concerned with the complex problem of implying the human presence in a non-objective art," a problem he addressed by taking his compressed experiences of light and shadow and returning them "to the world as a physical poem." His sculptures have a certain poetic quality

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shrewdly tempered by their hard geometric planes and by the ubiquity and commonness of the materials themselves. By juxtaposing wall-mounted sculptures with free-standing ones and including a set of seven watercolors and two late untitled drawings, the spring show at Robert Miller's capacious new space in Chelsea seemed to emphasize the graphic, almost pictorial, character of the artist's sculptural work.

Wilmarth achieved this distinctive mix of the graphic and the sculptural through his signature use of cable and by brushing planes of glass with acid, giving them a streaked and frosted look. In *Stocking Stairs Blue* (1976), a single length of cable holds an arcing, convex panel of blue-green glass against a wall at eye level. The cable runs vertically down the outside of the translucent glass, passing through a drilled hole to run horizontally across the back side of the glass, then out another hole and up the outside again, thereby describing a rectangle on the upper-half of the plane. It is an elegant, apparently simple work in two materials, and yet Wilmarth manages to suggest a number of associations in the way he combines them. While the shape and brittleness of the glass remind us that the piece is a sculpture, Wilmarth, by stringing the cable in front and behind the glass, evokes the varying pressures of graphite on paper. The work's size and placement on the wall, as well as the acid streaking, only further the pictorial associations. At times, however, the cable takes on a more functional, somewhat less graphic role, as in *Susan Walked In* (1976), a larger, free-standing piece in which a strand of cable anchors a plane of glass to a steel, bench-like structure.

In almost all the pieces in this show, color—of the glass itself, and how it changes when viewed from different angles, when it overlaps with other plates of glass or steel; of the steel itself, and of the rust patterns on it—plays a surprisingly central part. Occupying a large room with generously luminous skylights, *Days on Blue* (1974–77), the centerpiece, inevitably called to mind Richard Serra's metal walls. But Wilmarth worked on a slightly smaller, more human scale, and the piece has none of the tilting precariousness of a Serra. A horizontal plane of glass the size of a large painting cuts through a much larger and longer plate of steel, freeing it of some of its weight, opening it up. Light on the glass reflects a range of blues and greens, causing its acid-brushed striations to resonate with the rust patterns on the steel. Much could be said, too, of the colors in the moody smaller sculptures using glass bulbs mounted on steel, which hung in a room with the series of lovely and delicate watercolor sketches from which they were derived. For instance, in *When Winter on Forgotten Woods Moves Somber* (1979–80), repeating ovoids create a *mise-en-abîme* of shapes with shifting color values. Blue patination stains on the steel play off against the blue of the glass bulb.

Wilmarth committed suicide in 1987 at forty-four. One can only hope that his work continues to gain the recognition that was largely denied him during his lifetime.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

"Francis Picabia: Late Paintings,"
at Michael Werner Gallery, New York.
April 12–June 10, 2000

Francis Picabia (1879–1953) embodied the spirit of eclecticism. An inconstant, philandering lover of art, he had no respect or patience for the integrity of artistic styles or for the ideologies that at times generate them. During his first thirty years as a painter, he moved restlessly from impressionism and postimpressionism through fauvism, orphism, cubism, dada, and surrealism, after which he skidded off on an idiosyncratic course that briefly visited many styles without settling into any one of them. Today when we think of him, it is the object portraits we tend to recall, those dadaist mechanical drawings, based largely on American advertisements, from the period 1915 to 1917. The late paintings, from the

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last thirty years of Picabia's life, which are on view in a grand, confusing, though always exuberant show at Michael Werner's new gallery, have received scant attention, in part because they defy categorization. Even to a generation weaned on the flitting allegiances of postmodernism, the late work must seem impossibly broad, the effusions of a man impassioned by a chaotic sensibility. These paintings encompass abstraction, illustration, academic realism, comic-book graphics, and a mélange of modernist styles, sometimes mixing several in a single frame; they allude to Renaissance painting, commercial art, naïve art, surrealism, and poster art, among other visual cues.

Perhaps Picabia's most enduring contribution from this period is his method of overlaying or sandwiching images in flat, legible *pentimenti* called "transparencies." *Les Acrobates* (1926) conjoins three overlaid drawings of men, in watercolor and pencil: one a Picassoesque neoclassical figure, the second a Matissean line drawing of a figure seen from behind, and the third a muscled athlete in a Tarzan loincloth holding a pose reminiscent of Zeus with his lightning bolts. The three figures stand in a desert-hued landscape, while a cartoon dog crouches at their feet. As in many of Picabia's paintings, irony and enthusiasm collide to form a disconcerting yet agreeable tableau. In the male figures, the artist's strength as a draftsman and his appreciation for the possibilities of his limpid lines are palpable, even as the absurd, snarling dog mocks these qualities. Apparently, Picabia gave free reign to his imagination, without any concern for the authority of critics or curators. His art is, as Dave Hickey remarks in the catalogue essay, "more legendary than legitimate." Despite his years among the modernist avant-garde, Picabia didn't hesitate to veer off into the kitschy precincts of *Portrait d'un couple* (c. 1942–43), a straight-on illustrational rendering in oil of a fresh-faced, smiling couple. Nor did he shrink from a pastiche of early Renaissance portraiture in *Portrait de Femme* (c. 1935), with its "aged" colors and faux craquelure. Because he inhabited so many styles and modes, it is almost impossible to make comparative judgments of quality among Picabia's late paintings. How, for instance, does one compare the decorative, semi-abstract *Fleurs* (c. 1938) with *Nu de dos* (1942–44), a realist nude on a black ground, or either of those two paintings with *Adam et Eve* (c. 1931), a vaguely antique Roman image of Adam and Eve with a large, grinning face painted over them? Our best means of entry into Picabia's world is by applauding his energy and his unwillingness to bridle it.

For better or worse—depending on one's sense of aesthetic rectitude—Picabia reveled in the disordered productions of his imagination, preferring no one direction or style over another. And, while it is true that his chameleon-like nature has condemned him to the art-historical sidelines, there seems no reason why we can't partake happily of his ungoverned appetite for image-making without wholly condoning it.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *What Was Lost*, poems by Herbert Morris (Counterpoint, $21), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Music

The "Philadelphia Sound" at 100

by Jay Nordlinger

Just possibly, the Philadelphia Orchestra is the most treasured musical institution in the world. Some would argue for the Metropolitan Opera, the Vienna Philharmonic, or even the Juilliard String Quartet. But for several generations now, the Philadelphians have been the pet of countless musical hearts. Statistics on such matters are somewhat sketchy, but the Philadelphia is probably the most recorded orchestra in history, and also the most traveled. Isaac Stern likes to say of Jascha Heifetz, "He was the sound that every violinist had in his ear as we were growing up." Similarly, the sound of the Philadelphia Orchestra—the fabled "Philadelphia Sound"—has long been, for many, the ideal sound of an orchestra.

The Philadelphians are now celebrating their centennial, having given their first concert in November 1900. As part of their celebration, they have released a boxed set of twelve discs, commemorating their extraordinary century of music-making.[1] This set comes directly from the orchestra—without the middleman of a proper record label—as has increasingly become the fashion. Orchestras find that they can do this fairly cheaply, and it is a smart way of getting relative rarities into circulation. Perhaps the most successful of these sets is the collection issued by the Cleveland Orchestra in honor of its former music director, the incomparable George Szell. These discs include music that Szell never recorded commercially, notably a Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*. The Philadelphia set, too, is highly gratifying—intelligently selected, intelligently organized, intelligently produced. With its array of conductors, singers, and instrumentalists, it is a grand tour through music and musical performance in the twentieth century. Quite simply, these are dream discs, a box of wonders.

One of the things that make the Philadelphia Orchestra remarkable is the fewness of its music directors. In its hundred years, it has had six. From 1912 to 1980, it had two: Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy. The latter was on the podium for forty-four years, making his tenure the longest of any conductor in America. (Evgeny Mravinsky led the Leningrad Philharmonic for a full fifty years.) The orchestra likes to boast of its "firsts," and who can blame it? To name only a few, it was the first orchestra to make a commercial recording via the electrical method (1925); the first to secure its own commercially sponsored radio broadcast (1929); the first to appear on national television (1948); and the first to offer its members a fifty-two-week performing contract, which it did in 1963. (Before then, orchestral musicians did odd

1 "The Philadelphia Orchestra: The Centennial Collection: Historic Broadcasts and Recordings, 1917–1998" may be obtained through the orchestra's website (www.philorch.org) or by calling (800) 457-8354. It is also available in certain Tower Records stores. The cost is $200.

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jobs in the off-season to keep themselves and their families afloat.) Let us not forget the orchestra's starring role in the 1940 film *Fantasia*, in which Stokowski shook the hand of Mickey Mouse.

Ah, Stoki and Mickey: there were some who never forgave him (Stokowski, that is). His talent for publicity has always colored his reputation, but suffice it to say that he was a great—truly a great—conductor and musician, no matter that he loved cameras (as they him) and married the likes of Gloria Vanderbilt. Born a Londoner in 1882—the Continental accent was just part of his act—he became a church organist, then turned to conducting in his late twenties. He began his amazingly prolific recording career in 1917, when he took his Philadelphia players across the Delaware River to the headquarters of the Victor Talking Machine Company in Camden, New Jersey. He went on to make recordings until shortly before his death in 1977, at age ninety-five.

Fittingly, the centennial set begins with that first recording, made about six months after the United States entered World War I. It is of a Brahms Hungarian Dance, which at under three minutes was about all the Victor company could handle. The sound is as you would expect—crude, scratchy, distant—but the music is nonetheless there, conveyed with Stokowski's unmistakable panache. Volume I of the set continues with a 1931 account of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The sound here is only a modest improvement on that of 1917, but, again, the conductor's power is evident. It is not surprising that Stokowski engages in some unusual things, such as a ritardando at the end of the first movement, but his idiosyncrasies are tolerable—sometimes even welcome—because they always work musically.

We then jump to 1964, when Stoki returned to Philadelphia for the Symphony No. 2 of Sibelius. The great Finn was one of the orchestra's "special" composers, along with Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich. Those three had many of their works premiered in Philadelphia, under either Stokowski or Ormandy. Stokowski is relaxed and sunny in the Sibelius, although he propels the Finale with its necessary drive. The recording has an immediacy, a liveness, which transports us back to the hall. In every bar, the Philadelphia Sound is gloriously apparent: lush, romantic, irresistible. The brass, too, is gleaming and even, with none of the blaring that can spoil an orchestral performance. Later, we are treated to a *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture, a work, you might say, that was made for Stokowski and this orchestra. Their 1962 account is almost impossibly beautiful. It soars and sighs and aches as the story of the lovers unfolds. Each part comes through with utmost clarity. Though this is a fantastically luxurious performance, it is a precise and disciplined one, too. In the final measures, Stokowski makes the music truly *breathe*—and Tchaikovsky's old warhorse is newborn.

Recent years have not been especially kind to the reputation of Stokowski's successor, Eugene Ormandy—but he deserves better. Many critics dismiss him as a lightweight, which is perhaps a price he has had to pay for his enormous popularity with the public. He seldom conducted music written before the romantic era. But he had any number of gifts, including judgment, leadership, musicality, and a famously good ear.

Born in Budapest as Jenö Blau, Ormandy began as a violinist, then found success as a conductor in America. He took Stokowski's gleaming and beautiful machine and kept its gleam and beauty—even enhancing them. The first of his recordings on offer here is a 1950 traversal of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, a piece made for glorying in strings, and thus another piece ideally suited to these forces. The Schoenberg is an exquisite work, exquisitely played. We also hear Ormandy in Rachmaninoff's strange and haunting tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*. This is one of those performances that critics like to describe as "unabashedly lush." But it is also shrewdly managed, not swimming aimlessly in gorgeous sound or emotion.

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Like Stokowski before him, Ormandy conducted a great many contemporary works, and the set includes the premiere performance of Walter Piston's Symphony No. 7 (1961). This is neither the most popular nor the best Piston symphony—Nos. 5 and 6 are superior—but it is surely a creditable work, for which Ormandy makes a strong case. He had a particularly fine hand over modern music: he was crisp, self-effacing, and cool. The playing here is strikingly clean—rich, of course, but with nothing wasted. Ormandy had the important ability of finding the thread of a piece and keeping it going. The execution of the Piston is astonishingly cohesive—a benefit, probably, of so long a collaboration between conductor and orchestra. Ormandy is similarly excellent in the Sixth Symphony of Shostakovich, recorded in 1969. His focus is totally on the score, and perhaps on the personality of the composer, but never on his own. "He had none," some would snort. Actually, he had personality in spades, but he also had a true sense of the conductor's role. Small wonder composers loved him.

The game of "Who Will Replace Ormandy?" took place for—oh, twenty years, at least. When the end finally came, in 1980, the successor turned out to be a young Italian, Riccardo Muti, who is represented here on one disc. The set's producers have taken care to feature him in music that shows him off: Berlioz, Verdi, and Respighi, among others. His account of Berlioz's *Roman Carnival Overture* is very tightly controlled, in true Mutian fashion. And the Philadelphia Sound is . . . something other than the Philadelphia Sound. It is brighter, though still refined and distinctive. Some used to complain that everything Muti did sounded like Verdi—but at least his Verdi did, and his reading of the overture to *I vespri siciliani* is splendid. So too his *Pines of Rome* (Respighi), which Muti makes the sonic spectacular it ought to be. As we listen, we think, This is what virtuoso orchestras do.

When Muti left Philadelphia in 1992—his tenure had not been altogether happy—he was replaced by a veteran but little known German, Wolfgang Sawallisch, who remains the orchestra's music director today (though he is expected to depart in a year or two). Sawallisch restored some of the sound that Stokowski and Ormandy had established and burnished, and he is a well-liked citizen of Philadelphia. He is, however, an uneven conductor—capable of outings that leave no impression at all, and ones that are quite unforgettable (such as a Shostakovich Fourteenth at Carnegie Hall last October). He, too, is accorded one disc in the set, on which the major work is Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*. Sawallisch not only conducts the piece, but assumes the piano part as well. The results are respectable, but nothing more—which is a shade disappointing in the context of so monumental a collection.

The fourth volume is devoted to guest conductors, and the roster is duly appetizing. We begin with Fritz Reiner and a 1931 account of Wagner's Transformation Music from *Parsifal*. Reiner is in the early part of his career, but he is completely himself. His Wagner is brisk, no-nonsense, and stirring. We also have a *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* conducted by Bruno Walter in 1947—dazzling, beguiling, utterly enrapturing. Walter was not renowned for his Debussy, but, by the evidence here, he should have been. Of note is the solo playing of William Kincaid, principal flutist of the orchestra from 1921 to 1960. In fact, it is a pleasure in these discs to get reacquainted with all of the Philadelphia's first-deskmen, including the clarinetist Anthony Gigliotti, the cellist Samuel Mayes, and the percussionist Charles Owen.

Predictably impressive is the Ravel of Charles Munch. He leads a *Daphnis et Chloé* Suite No. 2 from 1963, and he simply puts on a clinic of French conducting. The Philadelphians respond to everything he does. Their playing seems untethered to the earth, floating in some impressionist other-world. The orchestra is stunningly nimble and fleet, giving Munch—who is music's *grand Charles*—a hair-raising finale. Among the

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other guest conductors are István Kertész, who was a "next Ormandy" for a while, until his tragic death in 1973 at forty-four, and Arturo Toscanini, who is heard both rehearsing and recording the "Queen Mab" Scherzo from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*—a shimmering, gossamer delight.

One of the most imaginative and satisfying of these volumes is dedicated to composers as conductors. Thus we have Zoltán Kodály leading the U.S. premiere of his *Peacock Variations* (1946). It is touchingly obvious that the conductor is fond of this creation, and it seems to rise from the Hungarian soil. Igor Stravinsky was a balky conductor, but he was in excellent and charming form for his *Baiser de la fée* suite in 1947. At the end of this disc, we get Aaron Copland in his *Lincoln Portrait*, performed outdoors in the summer of 1976, America's bicentennial year. The narrator is Marian Anderson, "The Lady from Philadelphia," then seventy-nine years old. Lincoln, the Philadelphia, Copland, Anderson: a more star-spangled lineup is impossible to imagine. Copland turns in a relatively quiet, restrained performance, going light on the inevitable bombast. And the voice—which is to say, the spoken voice—of Anderson is, in a word, perfect.

Another inviting volume is given over to some of the greatest singers of the century, including Anderson. There is Beverly Sills in 1974, singing one of her specialties, Mozart's *Exsultate, jubilate*. She was a tremendously appealing Mozart singer, and we are reminded what a remarkable instrument she had. Next is her great rival, Joan Sutherland, in the mad scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, followed by Franco Corelli (pouring on voice), Dorothy Maynor, George London (with Stoki in "Mephistopheles' Serenade" from Gounod's *Faust*—a couple of old devils on stage), and other immortals. To finish off the disc is the thrill of a 1962 Immolation Scene with Birgit Nilsson and Stokowski. For those who admire this singer, this is the summit—a mouth-watering document.

The set's final volume belongs to the instrumentalists. The pianists: Josef Hofmann, William Kapell, and Sviatoslav Richter. The violinists: Heifetz, Michael Rabin, and Leonid Kogan. At the last, there is a sad appearance by the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, shortly before her career was brought to a halt by illness, with her husband, Daniel Barenboim, on the podium.

Hofmann is presented in a 1938 performance of Beethoven's Fourth Concerto with Ormandy. The sound is shaky, but the poetry of the pianist is unhindered. Not ever will you hear the Andante rendered with greater poignancy. Kapell is heard in the Brahms Concerto No. 1, a work that he did not have the time to record commercially. (He died at the age of thirty-one. There seems, however inadvertently, to be an emphasis on tragedy in this set: Kertész, Kapell, du Pré, Rabin, Kogan. We may ask where Guido Cantelli and Dennis Brain are.) Kapell's reading is characteristically athletic and muscular, and if his Rondo is sloppy, it is at least exuberant and daring. The Heifetz selection is one of which the collection's promoters are especially proud. It is a 1934 studio recording of the Sibelius Concerto, and it would have been the very first recording of this work. Heifetz, though, refused to permit its release, having quarreled with Stokowski (as he did with virtually everyone). The Philadelphia flacks are right to be proud: this Sibelius is icy, probing—definitive.

The eye-rubbing praise for this set could go on indefinitely. Over and over, the listener gasps at what has been let loose from the Philadelphia's vaults. The temptation to resort to clichés is strong—to say, for example, that the collection is a feast (that inescapable word) for the ear, mind, and soul. The "Fabulous Philadelphians," as they were dubbed, may have seen their best days; orchestras rise and fall, depending on their leaders and personnel. But of their past, there can be little arguing. It may not be unmatched; but it is certainly unsurpassed.

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Opera note

Cold Sassy Tree, by Carlisle Floyd,
at the Houston Grand Opera.

At seventy-four, the composer Carlisle Floyd ought to be enjoying the pleasures associated with eminence and old age. His music-drama *Susannah* (1955) is said to be the most frequently performed opera written by an American. *Of Mice and Men* (1970), his treatment of Steinbeck's novel, earned favor in Europe. Even his failures—for example, a poorly received *Wuthering Heights* (1958, later revised)—have been noble. In sum, Floyd has produced a body of work both distinctive and frequently appreciated. Some of the credit for that success must go to the Houston Grand Opera, which for the past quarter-century has been aiding the composer in his efforts. In 1976, after Floyd had moved from Florida to Houston, the company produced *Bilby's Doll*. In 1981, *Willie Stark* was presented under its auspices and, in 1991, *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*. In addition, the HGO has mounted revivals of *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* on several occasions. So it was with justified local pride and no small amount of flutter that the company offered the premiere of yet another Floyd opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*, on April 14. Yet, though this was the debut of a new work by one of America's best-known opera composers, a lack of excitement, even indifference, characterized the expectations of the visiting press corps. None of the buzz that surrounded the premieres of recent operas by André Previn, William Bolcom, or John Harbison could be detected in the thick Texas air. Indeed, *The New York Times*, something of a kingmaker when it comes to such events, chose not to send a critic at all. And several journalists who were present made little effort to hide their contempt for Floyd's scores, even using the damning word "accessible" to describe his easy-on-the-ears music and straightforward librettos. They should have held their tongues, for in the event, *Cold Sassy Tree* proved as effective as it was unassuming, as taut as it was tender, and as sharp as it was honest.

Floyd based his opera on Olive Ann Burns's 1984 novel of the same name. But unlike Burns's rambling, garrulous book, a faux memoir of life in rural Georgia during the early twentieth century, Floyd's self-styled comedy-drama is a model of concision and point. Whereas Burns told of life in the town of Cold Sassy through the reminiscences of fourteen-year-old Will Tweedy, complete with affected dialects and intentionally bad spelling, Floyd offers a more detached perspective. Will still frames the unfolding events, serving as narrator-cum-protagonist, but banished are Burns's too-precious attempts at veracity. The story at the center of *Cold Sassy Tree*, the unconventional marriage between Will's grandfather Rucker Lattimore and Miss Love Simpson (the name says it all), is told straight and sweet in three acts, with enough peripheral action to keep matters interesting but not so much as to dilute the primary drama. For this telescoping—refining really—Floyd deserves much credit. He has taken an unwieldy, if rich, novel and transformed it into a lean folk opera that owes little to its European antecedents. *Cold Sassy Tree* does not aspire to great depths or great heights. Nor is it a self-conscious work, bashfully standing in the shadows, convinced of its own inferiority. Rather, it confidently declares itself and gets on with things.

The story couldn't be simpler. Rucker Lattimore, a store owner, has lost his wife and needs a woman to look after him. His choice of the considerably younger Love Simpson is shocking enough, but his marriage to her after a mere three weeks of mourning is positively scandalous, at least as far as the citizens of Cold Sassy are concerned. Floyd's opera hinges on this unlikely union and the mishaps and misunderstandings that spring from it. In lesser hands, Burns's episodic novel might have proved disjointed, but Floyd has Will Tweedy telling more compelling tales than Burns ever did. In any event, old-fashioned

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Americana lies at the heart of *Cold Sassy Tree*, and no living composer is better at exploiting that than Floyd.

Though there was little doubt what Floyd would do with this material—a characteristic sound runs through his scores—the composer announces his intentions early, in an anthemic opening. Floyd is something of a compositional literalist, and his music's meaning is never obscure. Rucker's marriage announcement, for instance, is accompanied by sharp, stabbing figures in the strings. And at the end of act two, when Love reveals a childhood rape, a veritable symphonic storm erupts from the orchestra pit. True, portions of this score recall some of the lush material the better film composers turned out in the 1940s and 1950s, but in general there is enough that is fresh (or at least fresh-sounding) to keep the ears engaged. At its best, Floyd's score transcends the merely attractive to become genuinely affecting. Love's "Rented Rooms" aria, in which she describes her hard life, is deeply touching. And Rucker's sermon aria in the next scene emerges as a gripping declaration of defiance. It is, in fact, a bona-fide operatic showstopper, something of a rarity these days. Memorable, too, is the aria in which the desperately poor Lightfoot McClendon, Will's putative girlfriend, asserts her desire to make something of her life. Rucker's eventual acknowledgment of real love for Love, with the gruff store owner sheepishly explaining, "I got to own up to somethin'," must have brought tears to some, but it is in Will's moving aria of loss, following Rucker's death, that Floyd's music is at its most heartbreaking.

A committed American cast, though largely little-known, did honor to Floyd's score, which presented few technical hurdles for the singers. The tenor John McVeigh, one of the company's former students, lent an agile, attractive voice to Will, turning the callow boy into a character worthy of attention. As his grandfather, the bass-baritone Dean Peterson offered requisite stentorian heft punctuated by smaller-scale virtues. The soprano Patricia Racette, the cast's most familiar name, used her bright voice to good advantage, her rapid vibrato giving texture to Love's mixed emotions. Under the baton of Patrick Summers, the HGO's music director, the orchestra played with much verve and occasional subtlety.

The director Bruce Beresford, fresh from the challenge (not terribly well met) of resetting *Rigoletto* in modern-day Hollywood for the Los Angeles Opera, proved his versatility with an unfussy production. He blocked his singers well, making certain that extraneous action never detracted from the main business. Most of the time, small ensembles held the stage, but even in moments when crowds were called for, Beresford didn't allow details to distract. To conjure the small town, the Australian director enlisted Michael Yeargan, whose list of accomplishments includes the Metropolitan Opera's production of Harbison's *Great Gatsby*. Yeargan's spiffy, realistic set design was utterly right, as were his plain but evocative costumes. Excellent lighting from the omnipresent Duane Schuler enhanced the mood, his work in the church scene especially beautiful, with golden light filtering through the windows.

Carlisle Floyd isn't America's Verdi. Even less is he this country's Wagner. Yet he often deals in national myths, though undoubtedly of the miniature gauge variety. On the cusp of a new century, it is tempting to look back, to seek connections with the past, comfort from continuity. *Cold Sassy Tree* allows us that vista, but thanks to Floyd's natural restraint, to say nothing of his fine sense of what is and isn't stageworthy, his newest opera is far from an exercise in sentimental mush, something it might have been in someone else's hands. It is instead an affirmation of small-town values and a gentle poke at common foibles. It is also something else: a quiet assertion that American opera, despite some high-profile failures in recent years, is alive and well and living deep in the heart of Texas.

—*David Mermelstein*

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The media

The politics of posturing

by James Bowman

The Weekly Standard marked the first anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings with an excellent essay by David B. Kopel, the research director at the Independence Institute of Colorado, entitled: "What If We Had Taken Columbine Seriously?" His point, expressed with a savage, almost Swiftian sense of indignation, was, first, that the police response to the emergency had been cowardly and ill-judged and, second, that none of those footling "gun control" measures—safety locks, background checks, the gun-show "loophole," etc.—questions of whose enactment or non-enactment had dominated public debate in America over the previous twelve months, would have done anything to have prevented the killings. Meanwhile, any discussion of either of the two measures which might have done so was studiously avoided.

Gun control advocates, that is, might have argued for a virtual ban on all firearms, like that enacted in Britain in the wake of the Dunblane massacre a few years ago, on the reasonable ground that it would probably have prevented the killers from accumulating their arsenal of weaponry. A discussion of this idea might also have touched on the fate of the Norfolk farmer, Tony Martin, who was recently jailed for life for shooting and killing a burglar in his house. Supporters of gun rights (and Mr. Martin) could have argued equally reasonably that the arming of teachers, even if it had not discouraged the killers from undertaking their wicked project in the first place, would almost certainly have made their toll of deaths and injuries much lighter. Kopel's peroration speaks for itself:

> Consider: Heavily armored police with machine guns protected themselves, instead of rescuing teenagers who were being murdered a few yards away. Except for two talk show hosts, the Colorado and national media virtually ignored this reprehensible failure to act.
>
> The anti-gun groups failed to push for the one item in their arsenal that could have prevented Columbine.
>
> The major pro-gun groups failed to push for the one item in their arsenal that could have prevented Columbine.
>
> And the worst of it is this: The leaders of these groups flinched not out of personal weakness but because both were pandering to congressmen who themselves lacked the nerve to take Columbine seriously. And these members of Congress were chosen in free elections by the American people, whose own lack of seriousness they well represent.
>
> The pro- and anti-gun groups failed to push for serious anti-Columbine laws because their polling told them that the vast majority of the American public could not bear to hear such proposals.
>
> And so, if there are two more people in America with hearts as depraved and souls as evil as the Columbine killers, your children and mine are just as much at risk as they were the day before Columbine.

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But then we knew that, didn't we? Or, if we didn't, it would only be another three weeks or so before the point was to be driven home once again by the nincompoopery of the "Million Mom March" on Washington for gun-control. As in every other manifestation of public sentiment on the subject, this did not of course mean real gun-control, though doubtless a few of those on the margins or tucked away in the middle of the half-million or so of self-described "moms" who made it to Washington secretly wished for such an outcome. So far as the march's public face was concerned, it meant the usual half-measures which would have increased bureaucracy and paperwork nuisances for (by definition) the law-abiding while doing nothing whatever to take guns away from the criminally-minded.

Not that the march was without any purpose at all. It made the participants feel better about their fear of crime, since no one had the heart to deprive them of the comforting illusion that they were doing something about it. It also made them feel better about themselves by offering them the opportunity to feel sympathy for some of those who had lost loved ones to gun violence and who had joined the march and addressed the marchers on the Mall. In addition, it allowed them to feel virtuous *as mothers* for putting themselves to some inconvenience for (as they were persuaded) the safety of their children. The one possibly effective, as opposed to certainly affective, result of the march was to get quite a lot of free media time to promote what has become a favorite cause of the Democratic Party in advance of this year's elections. It must have been rather a laugh for Friends of Bill from the president's days as an earnest young war-protestor to see him in his new role as defender of motherhood.

The media's treatment of this well-meaning exercise in meaning well was typical. There was little or no attempt to elucidate the purposes of the march, such as they were, still less to evaluate the quality of the reasoning on which those purposes were founded. On the few occasions when either of Kopel's "serious" solutions was seriously considered, it was the second, and then only to be dismissed in some such fashion as *The New York Times* did:

> Even worse ideas [i.e., than those of the NRA] came from some participants in a counter-march staged by gun advocates. They argued for the arming of teachers and other citizens and the right to carry concealed weapons on the theory that if more of the "good" people owned guns for self-protection, the "bad" people would be deterred from attacking them. That sounded more like a recipe for shootouts than for crime control.

That use of quotation marks tells you all that you need to know about *The New York Times*'s mentality (or lack of it)—and that of much of the media.

On the fine Sunday morning when the marchers gathered on the Mall, the media-folk, particularly the ones from TV, were busy doing what they always do, which was to find two equally brainless but somewhat famous spokeswomen, one for each side, and then listen respectfully while they take it in turns to mouth platitudes. So on Fox News Sunday on the morning of the march, Senator Barbara Boxer of California ("I can show you statistics that the number of people in favor of sensible gun laws is overwhelming") squared off against an actress called Susan Howard who once appeared on "Dallas" ("Why don't we put our children first and take a lesson from them? . . . I learned responsibility, I learned the Ten Commandments. . . . And I learned them at home.")

"Meet the Press" on NBC briefly promised to rise above this level of fatuity by pitting the march's organizer, Donna Dees-Thomases, who is a sister-in-law of the Clintons' friend Susan Thomases and is on leave from being a publicist for CBS, against Wayne LaPierre of the National Rifle Association. Perhaps in order to emphasize the sexual symbolism, the show added Representative Bob Barr, Republican of Georgia, as a sec-

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ond pro-gun voice and Representative Carolyn McCarthy of New York (whose husband was killed by a demented gunman on the Long Island Railroad) as a second anti-gun voice. But this discussion quickly bogged down in accusation and counter-accusation as to which side was "playing politics" with gun legislation (politics? *moi*?) and ended with LaPierre's bid to soften his image by saying that "parents need to love their kids; kids need to love their parents." Do tell!

The actress and television talk-show host Miss Rosie O'Donnell, who was later to take her place as the march's mistress of ceremonies (and to be greeted by the crowd, according to the *New York Times*, "like a rock star"), was afforded an opportunity to display her powers of reasoning in conversation with Cokie Roberts on "This Week" on ABC. Citing as her principal credential the fact that she had "been a child advocate all my career," she mentioned the frequently quoted statistic that 4000 children die from gun violence each year (omitting to add that nearly all are teenage gang members who shoot each other), and then she said: "We have 200 million guns and 20,000 gun-laws, so the guns are winning." She went on: "You make a teddy bear, five federal regulations; you make a gun, zero."

Perhaps she thought that there was some danger of guns catching fire when they are placed in babies' cribs? She then proceeded to cite as the general principle upon which her political philosophy was founded the fact that my right to own a gun should not "impede on" her right and her children's rights to live in safety and that her program of action could be summed up as follows: "I want to remove the guns from the people who are bad and should not have them. That's what I want to do." Well. That's all right then. Her unimpeachable good intentions, together with her creditable feelings of sympathy for those who have been victims of guns are obviously all that count with the TV audience, not the banality with which they are expressed nor the foolishness and irrelevance of the legislation which she proposes as a result of them.

But what else do we expect? Whom else have we to blame but the media for the fact that, during the Clinton era, the politics of moral posturing have become almost the only politics we have? Of course there is the sheer political cowardice mentioned by Kopel. If one or two leaders on each side were honest and prepared to set an example of intellectual rigor in spite of the inevitable caterwauling any such attempt would be sure to provoke in the media, it might set the example for others. But I doubt it. I think Kopel doubts it too. The reason we haven't taken Columbine seriously is that we are afraid to, just as we are afraid of anything serious or radical, anything that might upset the really rather nice life that we've built for ourselves in turn-of-the-century America. Bad things still happen, but our determined concentration on our feelings and political measures that are exclusively trivial, symbolic, or palliative helps us to forget about them.

It was the political genius of Bill Clinton to have seen this first and seen it clearest —that a dependable majority of Americans don't want to do *anything* serious (why tamper with success?), but that, at the same time, they want for the sake of their self-esteem to think of themselves as serious people whose feelings of outrage at atrocities like Columbine, like their feelings of unease at lesser provocations, are being consulted and assuaged by all the trivial, symbolic, or palliative measures that the ingenuity of the president and his advisers can come up with.

The mirror image of Clintonian politics is not to be found in the largely ineffective Republican opposition, which despite majorities in both houses of Congress can do nothing but dig in their heels over the same measures and so increase their symbolic worth. Instead it is in those who *do* want radical and structural change (or say they do)—to upset the gravy train and spill the gravy—but for entirely trivial reasons. The demonstrators who came to town to disrupt

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the meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund just a month before the significant-fraction-of-a-million-moms did, wanted to smash the system because some stitcher of sneakers in Indonesia or picker of coffee in Brazil who is growing fat among his own people on the fifty cents an hour he is being paid by Nike or Starbucks wouldn't be making the American minimum wage if he were in America and had to pay American prices—which he isn't and doesn't.

This kind of thoughtless, even flippant radicalism is not a new thing. Back in the 1960s Jerry Rubin and his Yippies first came up with the idea of "revolution for the hell of it." Such honesty is as long gone as the serious radicals and reactionaries who opposed it at the time, but something of the same sentiment can be detected, beneath a veneer of "feelings" talk and incoherent ideology, of the World Bank demonstrators, who had first made their presence felt in the demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization last year. After the Washington demonstrations, Franklin Foer wrote an interesting piece in *The New Republic* about this strange revival of anarchism among what he called the New New Left:

> The anarchists have done something no one has done in ages: They've made the left fun. They've done it by prioritizing action over theory—letting a thousand flowers bloom rather than looking for ideological coherence. But, in so doing, they've also made the left quite, well, stupid. Protest slogans are always dumb, but last week's slogans—"Spank the bank," "We want puppets, not a puppet government"—were almost entirely meaningless. When I asked anarchist protesters to define their ideology, they responded, nearly universally, that anarchism is socialism without the state. But that raises more questions than it answers, questions about which the New New Left couldn't care less. Unlike its 1960s predecessors, whose leaders devoured Marcuse and Mills, the New New Left has little patience for theory. Read a copy of *Z* magazine, the anarchist's organ of choice, and you'll find advice about protest tactics—not intellectual ruminations. When I asked protest organizers for a list of books about anarchism, the vast majority were completely flummoxed.

Foer attributes the fantastically painted and dressed anarchists of the New New Left rather to pop culture, especially that of the Punks, than to any conscious derivation from the New Left of the 1960s. In fact, as he points out, consciousness generally is not among their strong suits. But he doesn't notice the extent to which the World Bank and WTO protests, were as much the products of the media culture as the Million Moms, to which the more thoughtful left represented by *The New Republic* tend to give a more sympathetic hearing. Some kinds of stupidity are easier to recognize than others, of course, and it helps to identify it when you can find, as Foer did, a certain Road Runner Crazy Kravitz who, dressed in "a puke-green blazer" and face-obscuring bandannas, frankly confesses: "I plan on doin' some damage."

Yet respectful profiles of some of Crazy Kravitz's less flamboyant but almost equally stupid allies appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. To the mainstream media these people, like the most prominent of the marching moms, were simply players in this day's or this week's comedy. As celebrities, or honorary, *ad hoc* celebrities, they could take their part on the political stage from which most elected politicians have been ejected as too boring unless, like President Clinton at the White House Correspondence dinner, they can tell a joke as well as Jay Leno. The media-people themselves, full of their own importance as God-like observers of the drama, have graciously vacated the stage as well, taking with them their small budget of critical acumen, and left it to the performers—those maudlin moms, those zany anarchists—to carry on with the show. You might as well just enjoy it if there isn't anything in particular that you want to do.

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Verse chronicle

The way of all flesh

by William Logan

At seventy-nine Richard Wilbur has survived most of the poets in the generation before him and some in the generation after. The new poems in *Mayflies*[1] often seem like things written forty years ago and put in long-term storage, but they could never be mistaken for the baroque, overmannered manner of his early work. Wilbur was once master of the filigree, the apparently extraneous and precious detail, the verbal undercarving that can look like magic in a period of carving and as fussy and dust-catching as Grinling Gibbons for a long while thereafter.

That moment of high formal style after the Second World War, of early Lowell, Wilbur, and Merrill, might be due for a revival when meter again becomes a language taught to the young, not got second-hand by the middle-aged. The promises of New Formalism look threadbare twenty years after the school opened its doors, but most of its poets had to acquire formal knowledge the hard way, long after their ears had been hardened by free verse.

The danger of a style more courtly than a courtier, civil with obedience, is that the poet may forget why he was writing in the first place—style becomes his *raison d'être*. Writers who survive the elegance of their style (Shakespeare, for example) are usually making a point: when style declines into a silver age, poets compete with each other in simile contests. Their constraints become conventions. The best of Wilbur's early poems had an edge to the fussiness: the beauty measured not just an ideal world, but the ruins of a world the imagination had lost. Poems like "First Snow in Alsace" and "'A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness'" were gorgeous in their surfaces, and in quarrels deeper than surface: the snowfall of words covered the wreckage of war.

Wilbur had great gifts he didn't squander so much as stop using, at least for his poetry. He became our premier translator of Molière and Racine, but whether he abandoned poetry or poetry abandoned him has never been clear. He has continued to write, doing little more than toying with his verse, the way a great cat toys with prey. The poems, now simpler and less distractingly ornate, don't seem to matter much to him, and it's hard to see how they can matter much to the reader, even at their best.

Crow's Nests

That lofty stand of trees beyond the field,
Which in the storms of summer stood
revealed

As a great fleet of galleons bound our way
Across a moiled expanse of tossing hay,

Full-rigged and swift, and to the topmost sail
Taking their fill and pleasure of the gale,

1 *Mayflies*, by Richard Wilbur; Harcourt, Inc., 80 pages, $22.

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Now, in this leafless time, are ships no more,
Though it would not be hard to take them for

A roadstead full of naked mast and spar
In which we see now where the crow's nests are.

Frost's wry homilies underlie this less homiletic observation (Wilbur wrote recently that he's "always in danger, even now, of succumbing to Robert Frost"); and yet how handsomely turned it is: the forests that once provided masts for tall ships stand like ghostly shadows of vanished fleets. With Wilbur's poems you wait for the cunning twist; here the pun that binds present and past recalls the reason a ship's lookout, the kind Ishmael envied on a Greenland whaler, was called a crow's nest. Wilbur can still bestir himself for his endings (his rhetoric dies in full plumage like a suicidal ballerina), but too many of the new poems don't remember at the end why they began. Slightly worn and depressive, they're edged with a melancholy that set in during the Eisenhower administration.

The new translations are deft, accomplished, sometimes irresistible (I was disappointed that the stunning version of Baudelaire's "The Albatross" had been lying around since 1955). If his prologue to Molière's *Amphitryon* manages to be erotic and stuffy (like a lecture on sex, in Latin), you sense Wilbur's relief at not being responsible for his subjects—the best translators may be those satisfied to stage the thoughts of other men. Wilbur's chief weapon as a translator, apart from his rueful elegance, is his limitless command of rhyme. He has an unsure sense of the colloquial, however, so when Dante is made to say (in a translation of *Inferno* XXV), "so tightly that they could not stir one jot" just before "Alas, Pistoia, why dost thou not ordain . . . ?," it's hard to know whether we're in the reign of Elizabeth II or Elizabeth I. (John Ashbery is only half-a-dozen years younger than Wilbur, yet they sound as if they were born centuries apart.)

What Wilbur discovered in style soon lost interest for him, as happens when a style fails to challenge its maker (you have to leave a few snakes in the garden, just to liven things up). As he got older, Frost got worse, but he never *gave up*. When you read Richard Wilbur's new poems, you think, "This is what Frost would sound like if he had given up."

Thom Gunn is an old man with a taste for young flesh, as he reports with glinty honesty throughout *Boss Cupid*[2] (the handsome skinhead on the jacket, dressed in Levi's and Doc Martens, looks ready to stomp a man like Gunn at the first opportunity—perhaps that's the point). At seventy, Gunn has begun to look back with a vengeance. The opening and closing sections are cast mainly in that glorious, now musty formal style of the Fifties, a style Gunn once savagely rejected. If this is the revenant's return, there's a fitting classical symmetry to it.

The Makers did not make
The muddy winter hardening to privation,
Or cholera in the keep, or frost's long ache
Afflicting every mortal nation
From lord to villagers in their fading dyes
—Those who like oxen strained
On stony clearings of the ground
From church to sties.

Those *sties* have all the firm rhetorical clinch of the period, with the astringent whiff of the church's birth in a stinking straw-filled manger. It has taken Gunn fifty years to turn back into a Movement poet like Donald Davie, and it sounds as if that's where he belongs, in a style stirred with second thoughts, seduced by the architecture of rhyme.

The language isn't always so adequate to Gunn's life in between, and the strain shows in his muscular sexuality. If Rochester and Swift could find in their iambics a scabrous and sexual tongue, why can't Gunn? His poems too often have a stilted deliberateness that makes their descents rudely comic:

2 *Boss Cupid*, by Thom Gunn; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 113 pages, $22.

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He lost the wrestler with the smile
Who pinned him to the mat of love for ever.

Or, even more mortifyingly:

If only I could do whatever he did,
With him or as a part of him, if I
Could creep into his armpit like a fly,
Or like a crab cling to his golden crotch.

Time changes not desire but the meaning of desire. The young can love the young all they want, but when a grand old man wants a sweet young thing all hell breaks loose. Gunn seems aware how sex-obsessed and wearying his talk can be (if this is the stuff he says to his readers, what does he whisper to lovers?), yet secretly he lives for the swagger: "he wore/ one of those net shirts/ so his nipples poked/ through two of the holes . . . ./ I could have killed/ for a chance to chew/ on those jumbo tits." Is there a double standard that allows gay men to lust after the young in a way unacceptable for men who lust after girls?

If these new poems are all about love, it is conditioned by the *fin de siècle* specter of AIDS, whose devastations lie grimly in the bedrooms and hospital sickbeds here. Gunn knows the frenzied bathhouse life of the Seventies and Eighties was a breeding ground for the disease, yet he longs for those days of drugs and "Dionysian experiment." Time has taken its toll—when thinking about using speed now, he mentions his high blood pressure.

An old man with the "greed for youth" recognizes that the young want to be fed upon. He makes few apologies (Gunn's attempts to be with-it put the vamp back in vampire), though the obsession with flesh is weirdly refracted through poems on the serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer. Either Gunn doesn't see the connection, or he's making crass play with it. In poems on serial killers, sympathy is short-circuited by disgust.

I don't want to remember Gunn as just a gay poet, though the more his recent poems have been praised the more he's written as one. His strongest work hasn't required sexual preference. The formal poems here suffer from their cautiousness (as if they'd set out to discover exactly what they'd discovered, and nothing more), while the free verse lacks authority, the lines failing to provide enough resistance to work against. In the vision of a beautiful GI, in an elegy for a young man not his lover, there are moments of regret and surrendered beauty the poems scarcely explore. Gunn uses with perfect selfishness the hustlers and homeless who service him—in this book of love, the love is coarse, heartless, and as mechanical as an instruction manual. He's unrepentant, not unreflective but all too willing to reflect, as if being an artist made a rough virtue of rough trade.

The oddity of Anne Carson's poems conceals every virtue except their originality and exposes every flaw except their contempt. *Men in the Off Hours*[3] is far from her strongest book, yet it has the fatal attraction of being more provocative, more irritating, and more gleefully obscure than most poetry in the off-hours of our prosaic age. Carson mixes the classic and contemporary with jaunty bravado, showering the reader with prose as if spraying him with a fire hose: she thinks nothing of lugging in classical allusions that would have given T. S. Eliot heartburn.

A professor at McGill, Carson is a classicist with avant-garde longings. It's easy to forget that many ancient authors broke the rules—only time has hardened the classics into classics. Her poems have a fierce, indrawn mystery that lives off the fragments of lost empire, like papyrus dredged from the sands of Oxyrhynchus:

Epitaph: Zion

Murderous little world once our objects had
gazes. Our lives
Were fragile, the wind

3 *Men in the Off Hours*, by Anne Carson; Alfred A. Knopf, 168 pages, $24.

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Could dash them away. Here lies the refugee
breather
Who drank a bowl of elsewhere.

This quatrain hangs from the fishhook of that *once*, which might mean "at one time" instead of "after." The jammed syntax, so brutely ambivalent (reminding us that manuscripts were once written without punctuation—you were supposed to *know* how the sentences fell, and if you didn't you weren't Greek, you weren't Roman), lies uncomfortably against the windy blather of that "bowl of elsewhere."

Carson is a great believer in blather: her poems are full of brittle ironies, temperature-taking feminism, a bossy sententiousness that isn't the fault of the classics so much as a common misuse of them. Her "confessions" by characters in Edward Hopper paintings (or perhaps the voices of the paintings themselves) hardly need to be spoken, the paintings are so vulnerable in their emptiness—and if spoken, don't need to be brutely banal ("Is/ it/ light/ from/ the/ street streaming in unshaded/ or/ a/ wind/ of/ autumn that pierces our bones?"). Tags from St. Augustine's *Confessions* can't weigh them into significance.

You have to wade through a lot of ideas to get to Carson's best work. The ideas are often more interesting than the poems (she doesn't have many natural poetic gifts, and sometimes seems to have no gifts at all); when they're not, the reader might be forgiven for thinking ideas a bad thing altogether. Ideas may keep a reader company when a poem is awful, but most readers would rather read a good poem than a good idea for a poem.

Men in the Off Hours begins with a twisty little essay on Thucydides and Virginia Woolf (it's like beginning a party with a lecture on sanitation); later Thucydides reappears in the sequence "TV Men," directing Woolf in a documentary on the Peloponnesian War. It's a sweetly daffy premise, but in the end it tells us little about Woolf and less about Thucydides. (The essay on "female pollution" that ends the book is more suggestive, if typically donnish and hectoring.) Have the classics fallen so far they need to be racy? Catullus's short poem on his lover's pet swallow isn't rescued by being butchered into mock perversion.

On her lap one of the matted terriers.
She was combing around its genitals.
It grinned I grinned back.
It's the one she calls *Little Bottle* after Deng
Xiaoping.

Deng Xiaoping? Yet Carson's recklessness is appealing when many poets live on Social Security long before retirement. When she's condescending to Freud or Audubon, when she juggles nouns and verbs like a guerrilla lexicographer ("use the hum/ of your wound/ and flamepit out everything," "keep Praguing the eye"), when she puts Lazarus on television or casts herself as Catherine Deneuve, you hardly know whether to laugh or cry. But then she'll write a passage that uses the damages of prose as a kind of poetry:

Bandaged head to foot in pieces of diagonal
cloth,
Lazarus flickers
between two heavily veiled people like a bit
of kindling
or a stalk
of something white and dry stuck in the
ground.
His eyes
have the power of the other world. Barely
open,
narrow shock slits
whose gaze is directed—simply, nowhere.

In this book such moments are too few. Carson is more architecture than art—you see the scaffolding for poems, yet you rarely see any poems, just a jumble of building materials. The means are so much the ends, perhaps you don't need ends anymore; though that's a morally self-satisfied point for a poet to make—it's as if she felt blueprints for poetry were better than poems. Carson is the sort of poet who wants to

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start a revolution but ends up giving civics lectures.

Tiepolo's Hound[4] is Derek Walcott's big chance to smuggle his paintings into print. They illustrate the glossy text of this long poem, and the best that can be said of them, in all their art-lesson amateurishness, is that they're much less charming than Elizabeth Bishop's and much less gifted than Edward Lear's. Walcott's paintings are earnest enough, but they're the work of a paint-by-numbers man. Many poets have longed to master arts other than poetry; the crispness of the visual, its fidelity to the inner courses of the eye (poets who wish to be painters generally want to be realists), offers in painting something like truth against all the rough, deflected falsities of language.

Walcott has always been a painterly poet, his lines smeared with the oil of image, thickly impastoed as if he'd bought tubes from Winsor & Newton and squeezed them onto the page. On an early trip to New York, he was haunted by a painting in the Metropolitan, a Renaissance feast where a dog lurked beneath the table, "a slash of pink on the inner thigh." *Tiepolo's Hound* entwines the lives of two Caribbean émigrés—the Impressionist Camille Pissarro, who left St. Thomas for the bohemian life of Paris, and Walcott, for whom the half-remembered image promises redemption for life abandoned in St. Lucia. The method, old as Plutarch's double-entry bookkeeping, is consciously flattering to the poet.

The guilt of the émigré is, for Walcott, bound to responsibilities of race and colonial culture. If you flee to the capitals of empire, haven't you betrayed your identity? Pissarro, the Sephardic Jew raised in a backwater Danish colony, is an elusive model for a poet born exactly a century later.

> They stroll on Sundays down Dronningens Street,
> passing the bank and the small island shops
> quiet as drawings, keeping from the heat
> through Danish arches until the street stops
>
> at the blue, gusting harbour, where like commas
> in a shop ledger gulls tick the lined waves.
>
> Sea-light on the cod barrels writes: *St Thomas*,
> the salt breeze brings the sound of Mission slaves
>
> chanting deliverance from all their sins
> in tidal couplets of lament and answer.

The tics of Walcott's style are on brilliant display: the rocking of loose pentameter (looser elsewhere than here), the formality of lines cast as couplets but rhymed as quatrains (the feminine rhymes like *commas/St. Thomas* often cheerful but awful), the nervous reminder of writing, the images burnished with effects of light and movement (that shop ledger finely judged against Pissarro's indenture as a clerk), and those "drawings" that unfortunately never let us forget this is art about art.

Walcott is too eager to turn the life of Pissarro, a sometimes middle-class bohemian, into a morality play on the exclusion of the Other. Laboring through the snubs visited on the upstart painters by the Salon, I longed for a potboiler like Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. The only thing worse than reading about a painter painting is reading about a painter not painting—you might at least be repaid in melodrama.

An artist's divided loyalties to career and country require more implication and less cant (in case you were wondering, colony = good and empire = bad), but Walcott sleepwalks through his poem, daubing at images like a Sunday painter. The action halts every few inches for another gaudy evocation of St. Thomas streets, Caribbean flora, French landscape, while the poem stalls like a still life and dies the slow death that poems do. Walcott is a rich and indelible writer, lost here in the musing of his talent, writing a picture book without any

4 *Tiepolo's Hound*, by Derek Walcott; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 164 pages, $30.

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pictures but his own. It's not giving much away to reveal he never finds Tiepolo's hound and isn't even sure the painting was by Tiepolo.

It's bad enough that Walcott's absent-minded descriptions stutter in repetition (birds figure as arrows again and again), full of teeth-grinding Wordsworthian meditation, blowsy cameos by History and Memory, jokey puns ("Jewdas," "Veron-easy"), grammatical slips ("any one of the/ two names"). It's bad enough Walcott has cynically invented Pissarro's homesickness for St. Thomas. Pissarro had been Paris-educated; he wasn't the provincial galoot of Walcott's fantasy, wandering the city doubtful and excluded and alone. After his schooling he had had to spend five miserable years back in St. Thomas and when he reached Paris again he wasn't alone—he lived there with his mother, his sister, her children, an uncle, cousins. He never returned to the island again.

It's all bad enough, but the poetry, despite its glut of glorious images, is sometimes worse.

> The blow of their rejection was a dull
> ache that sat like an anvil on his heart,
>
> all he had made in joy, thought beautiful,
> in their directness was indifferent art,
>
> the pavement pictures of an islander
> struggling with every stroke to realise
>
> a life not his, work whose earnest candour
> retained a primal charm to expert eyes.

Like an anvil. This milks the sentimental significance like Sir Arthur Sullivan in search of a lost chord. By the time Walcott claimed that Gauguin died for our sins I was ready to convert.

Jorie Graham's *Swarm*,[5] which sounds like a bad movie about killer bees, is a pocket *Inferno* of poetic sins. Most of these poems haven't been consigned to hell—they've chosen to live there. The poet of *Erosion* and *The End of Beauty* now puts little of her intelligence into her work (little of her intelligence and less of her logic), the words hurled scrappily onto the page, the poetic line fussed with until it lies tangled like yarn. This wouldn't matter if the poems survived the gnomic density of their creation (no one cares about the means if the ends are good poetry), but too often the vanities of imagination produce nothing more than this:

> Explain two are
>
> Explain not one
>
> (in theory) (and in practice)
>
> blurry, my love, like a right quotation,
>
> wanting so to sink back down,
>
> you washing me in soil now, my shoulders
> dust, my rippling dust,
>
> Look I'll scrub the dirt listen.
>
> Up here how will I
>
> (not) hold you.

Single lines become stanzas, as if to slow their breathless urgency to a crawl. In their gauzy preoccupation with metaphysics, the lines forget themselves, the antiphonal parentheses interrupting with second thoughts and hesitant reversals of meaning. Browning adored the simulacra of doubt and equivocation; Graham's poems often seem monologues of a metaphysical personality disorder, every perception analyzed in Freudian duration for its false starts. The icy beauty is matched only by the tedious vacancy.

Some of these techniques have long been in the armory of the avant-garde, and Graham has seen their advantage to a poetry trying to mimic perception (always, always,

5 *Swarm*, by Jorie Graham; Ecco Press, 115 pages, $23.

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in the slowest of motion) or to wrestle with sullen philosophies of knowledge and belief. She has become a poet of process, of the fine featherings of instinct, her poems a visual splatter not as comic as Cummings but stealing the short-tempered dramas of typography. In the tension of lines broken against themselves, the words are sometimes reduced to those poetry magnets people stick on fridges: "Explain tongue breaks thin fire in eyes." You sense here the Bible's "cloven tongues like as of fire," but it is suggestion without substance.

Nearly half the poems in *Swarm* are disordered sections of an ur-poem called "Underneath," which "negotiates passionately with those powers human beings feel themselves to be 'underneath': God, matter, law, custom, the force of love"—that's the jacket's idea (poets often have to write flap copy these days, and when libraries toss the dust jackets they lose the most naked and self-publicizing version of the poet's intentions). Poems vaguely address a lover, invoke Lear and Agamemnon, but they manage to sound serious without doing more than gesturing importunately. The problem is not that these poems are puzzling, troubled, sibylline—it's that they're all these and pretentious as well.

Exhale (in years)
*
The shadows live
*
Fleshless lovers
*
The tabernacle of
*
(fleshless lovers)
*
(with no lifetimes laid hard on them)

This poetry of dreamy portentousness is more dispiriting than anything Graham has written. No layers of intellectual substrata can rescue lines that offer so little in their surfaces. Hints of Christian faith and trust (the lines like messages rapped from the hulls of sunken submarines, like scraps from Dead Sea scrolls) ought to give the poems weight and substance, but the sentence fragments, missing words, vacuous pauses, and other detritus of style have made Graham ever more absent in her presence, ever more likely to fall victim to lines assured in their pretensions: "I speak now for the sand," "the acid slippers of eternity being tried on each new foot," "War then tidying-up then war. (*I see*)," and, with smiling obscurity, "Distance leaks." As in Swinburne, the dangers of style outweigh the advantages.

Graham imagines herself a visionary (poets writing this badly almost always have high-minded reasons)—otherwise it would be difficult to explain the self-drama, the absence of humor (humor would make her vulnerable), the way the poems gassily expand to fill available space. There's a rare glimmer of the lyric poet she once was ("where the raven suddenly wetly and rawly/ roughens the low vacillations of various windsweeping/ hushings"), but Graham has lost her sense of embarrassment and humility. Reading her hither-thither intellectualizing, I remembered Gloria Swanson's lines in *Sunset Boulevard*—"I *am* big. It's the pictures that got small." In these numbed, overemphatic, philosophic poems, every gesture will be stared at, though it means almost nothing. Dante planned no better punishment for ambition.

The watercolor lucency and smoky depths of Linda Gregg's poems remind me of Roethke, whose work is still obscured by the cloud of unknowing that follows death. (Death is the review from which many reputations never recover.) *Things and Flesh*[6] is a title crudely Aristotelian in its categories, but if Gregg were Greek she'd be a stoic who had once been a hedonist. It's easy to prefer philosophers who live their philosophy rather than talk about it, easier still those who keep their philosophy secret, as if it were shameful as sex or private as

6 *Things and Flesh*, by Linda Gregg; Graywolf Press, 81 pages, $14.

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religion. Gregg's poems are compact, self-consciously mysterious, living on the masochism of lost love and remembered pain, of shadowy forces that govern behavior and belief.

More than New

One of the men begins to sing. The woman
turns from side to side, flouncing her skirt
and stomping. The men play their guitars.
He begins to sing again. She stamps harder
but it is not big enough. The man sings
so hard it breaks the song and becomes
wailing.
The woman is proud. The men are proud.
Everybody is proud. And it is still not
strong enough. The gods are relaxed,
pleased,
but justice is unmoved. Says, "Show me
something.
Don't mess with me. Show me something I
can believe."

These prose statements have little poetic about them: only the line breaks keep this from becoming a legal deposition. The incantation of pride is comic, almost joky, but then the poem shifts register. The gods may be appeased by musical offering, but justice is not. Justice wants, not to be believed in, but something to believe (you could say readers want that, too). It's just a crude scene with a strange torsion to the ending, an ending that suggests that behind what we see are angry principles, unassuaged.

Gregg is hypnotized by what Jarrell called the "dailiness" of life (her poems glow like Cézanne apples). She has stripped life away to essentials, or life has stripped her to essentials; and the poems are a haunted meditation on what is left—a few people cooking, a man slipping a safety pin into his skin, tea in a Muslim graveyard. Often the poems start with bitter, agitated lines ("There is a flower. We call it God," "All things we see are the shapes death makes") that sound like Emily Dickinson when she's off her medication. They lie there as if the poet had to write them, as if they were written from *anangke*, the Greek necessity—most poems sound as if a poet had written them for tenure.

Etiology

Cruelty made me. Cruelty and the sweet
smelling earth,
and the wet scent of bay. The heave in the
rumps
of horses galloping. Heaven forbid that my
body not
perish with the rest. I have smelled the rotten
wood
after rain and watched maggots writhe on
dead animals. I have lifted the dead owl
while it
was still warm. Heaven forbid that I should
be saved.

Gregg believes, like a philosopher, that actions have meanings, and she's unsparing if self-dramatic in her analysis. The other contemporary lost in a similar world of myth and tension, of the black mist of psychology, is Louise Glück. Their differences are instructive—they're both fiercely proud and merciless in their intelligence, but Glück sounds like a victim, Gregg like a sphinx who has just eaten three travelers for breakfast.

The sour intensity of Gregg's poems is an acquired taste, and her failings make it tempting to dismiss her. The poems are repetitive in mood and manner (grindingly so), the poet preening in her discontents, the gloomy tone so unrelieved you think the author is beyond, not simple pleasures, but simple enjoyment of pleasure. Boiling everything away to banalities, the poems give the trivial unbearable significance. Gregg has been flayed toward sacredness (she doesn't ask to be liked, and that makes you like her). After the weary irony of so much contemporary poetry, written by victims who aren't victims, it's a relief to read poems whose mysteries are deep in what they must say.

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Books

Recognizing the real thing

by Merlin James

Jed Perl's project as an art critic has been reformulated and reiterated over a long period. He currently writes a column on art in *The New Republic*, and has contributed for many years to such publications as the British magazine *Modern Painters*, *Vogue*, and indeed *The New Criterion*. His new book[1] is not his first collection of his essays in book form, and the very act of gathering together what were originally journalistic pieces implies that in sum they offer something more than a casual, passing commentary on gallery and museum shows.

Perl is deeply sceptical of the art he sees being promoted by the major international art institutions, and he champions certain less acclaimed artists whom he thinks deserve more attention. Their work suffers neglect, he feels, largely because of the prevalent tastes and prejudices of the "official" art world. He posits the existence of an alternative, largely invisible art world where substantial artistic concerns, traditions, researches, and developments are being stoically kept alive in the studios of painters and sculptors. These artists have often the respect of colleagues, and of a few collectors and critics, and sometimes they are supported by smaller museums and university galleries. But they frequently have to content themselves with showing at artist-run cooperative spaces, and the long-term effects of being deprived of a wider audience are demoralizing. They face the "nightmare," as he puts it, of achieving that hard-won artistic breakthrough in their work, only for it to be greeted with disregard, dismissed as inconsequential.

Hence the "crisis" of Perl's subtitle. The institutional art machine, including both the powerful public museums and the major commercial galleries, and by implication the critics, collectors, and intellectuals who essentially serve the system, tends to promote a postmodern art that is explicitly ideological and "issue based" (and often politically correct) in content and that trades on technical novelty and fashionability. It favors an instant visual impact which, while it may be theorized about at length, demands little time to contemplate and ponder. The very skills required to appreciate, and by implication to create, a work of visual art in the tradition of Chardin, Manet, Picasso, and Mondrian are dying of neglect. Art colleges no longer nurture them, and an accelerated world of consumer media no longer has, in any sense, time for them.

Not all of the present book is spent arguing this case directly. There are sections here on Léger, on Calder and Aalto, on African art, and on the opening of the Getty Museum in California where Perl has no special axe to grind. These are commonsensical and readable musings on Corot and Chardin, and artists such as Balthus, Fair-

1 *Eyewitness: Reports from an Art World in Crisis*, by Jed Perl; Basic Books, 384 pages, $35.

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field Porter, Jean Hélion, Leland Bell, R. B. Kitaj, and Leon Kossoff—all of earlier generations than his current favored names, but offering certain precedents for them. Perl has, essentially, his own version of a now well-recognized "alternative" tradition of modernism of the sort Leland Bell (a major influence on Perl) promoted strenuously during his lifetime. Bell insisted on the importance, alongside accepted heroes such as Cézanne, Picasso, and Mondrian, of Corot, of Derain (who adulated Corot), of Giacometti and Balthus (who adulated Derain), of Vuillard, of Porter (who adulated Vuillard), and of Hélion (who like Derain turned from avant-garde styles to a tradition-aware figuration). The expansive and crystalline still lifes, portraits, and landscapes of Louisa Matthiasdottir, Bell's wife, and the poetic-prosaic figuration of their daughter Temma Bell, are both celebrated in the present book.

Perl is sometimes criticized for promoting an insular group of artists, identified with a limited number of galleries (among them Salander-O'Reilly, Tibor de Nagy, and the Bowery Gallery), and for being too defensively resistant to the fashionable or new to be able to recognize what might be the equivalents to the Picassos or Cézannes that he so loves from former epochs. He is sometimes seen, in other words, as a partisan conservative. But these criticisms are not really damaging or relevant. The identification and promotion of a fairly cohesive or interrelated group of artists is one of the valid roles of a critic, and the great artists of any era were often a tightly knit group with fiercely partisan promoters. Anyway, Perl's favored figures are varied enough, stylistically, within the media of painting and sculpture. He is careful, as well, not to be too unequivocal in his approbations and dismissals. So he will confess that certain Kossoff portraits seem clogged and closed down technically and certain cityscapes merely wobbly rather than pulsating with energy, though he clearly rates the painter highly. He distinguishes Temma Bell's landscapes, which he considers artistically highly informed yet individual, from those of another "traditionalist" practitioner, Stuart Shils, which he might have been expected to support, but which he feels are formulaic. Likewise he will admit that Alex Katz's paintings can have wit and panache, even though ultimately Perl thinks his paintings amount to little more than "ingeniously personalized wall decor." He takes seriously Bill Jensen's paintings and Jeff Wall's staged light-box photographs, thus demonstrating that he is not drawn only to art that lacks "official" sanction. And in pieces in the book on Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns, on Nan Goldin's ciberchromes of daily life in the age of AIDS, and Bruce Nauman's disturbing videos, Perl also allows himself to entertain the possibilities of their work, before finally finding it symptomatic of the main malaise. That malaise is characterized by an ironic detachment from the notion of an expressive brushstroke building to an organically composed, complex whole, and a preference for the quick and literal shock or thrill of emotive images, ripe for critics to transform, through theoretical interpretation, into art.

Rather than wishing for a greater display of open-mindedness and breadth of interest in this book, one might in fact wish for an even greater focus on the painting and sculpture of which Perl really approves. His attempt to show that he is in principle open to video and performance (he recently claimed to find merit in the work of the British Goldsmith-generation video artist Sam Taylor-Wood) usually ends up with a predictable reassertion of his preference for his own roster of names—for Trevor Winkfield's schematic quasi-allegories, Gabriel Laderman's elaborate figure compositions, Barbara Goodstein's plaster reliefs of figures and landscapes on plywood panels, Stanley Lewis's Giacomettiesque studio interiors. However accurate Perl's indictments of mainstream art-world machinations and mores, the continual setting of his approved artists against the hyped trends and stars of the international scene, and the arguing of

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their case as victims of institutionalized prejudice and neglect, ultimately does them no favors. Even if true, it ends up sounding unlikely, and a little like special pleading. Also, the book seems caught at the level of polemic, with too little space left for celebrating its true heroes. It is at times as if the attack on the avant-garde establishment is of more real interest than the supposedly better works that are excluded from establishment taste.

What is required, surely, is a non-defensive, non-combative argument for the virtues of the contemporary artists Perl admires, in terms of the slow critical reading which he demonstrates well in the discussion of a single painting by Chardin towards the end of the book. Yes, there are a few paragraphs here on a landscape by Temma Bell, on studio paintings by Winkfield and Stanley Lewis, on some work of Jensen and Joan Snyder. These are the better moments in the book, but they do not go nearly far enough in trying to draw the reader into an appreciation of those works' virtues. If the skills of close, considered contemplation of paintings have been lost, then we need to be re-initiated into them by the critic. If works such as these are unfashionable, then the critic will need to argue compellingly for their relevance and urgency, case by case, picture by picture, passage by passage. If such examination of works is difficult in the confines of art journalism, there would have been nothing to stop Perl rewriting these pieces, upping the critical engagement (and perhaps cutting some of the more facile journalistic swipes at the opposition) for the more lasting format of a book.

Many readers who share some of Perl's enthusiasms for earlier painters like Hélion, Derain, Balthus, or Matthiasdottir will be perfectly ready to be persuaded of pleasures and complexities that might be eluding them in Goodstein or Lewis or Winkfield. But there is not enough in this book to win such readers over. Nor is it simply greater detail and specificity that is required in the description of the work. Perl needs to make comparisons with related paintings. To make a compelling argument for an artist's value, one which leaves the reader convinced by, or at least respectful of, the critic's considered opinion, it is important to imagine what the reasonable objections to the work in hand are likely to be, and then to try to demonstrate why they do not pertain here, as they might to seemingly similar work. One has to envisage the best possible case against one's subject, and defend against that case. Perl briefly affirms Winkfield over the superficially similar and more widely celebrated painter Larri Pittman, but we need an image from both, and a talking-through of why Winkfield is not only more involving and sustaining, and more resistant to easy postmodern relativism than Pittman (and why that is a good thing), but also why it would be wrong to read Winkfield as whimsical or fussy, his technique bland, his mix of abstraction and figuration overfamiliar from Stuart Davis or Gerald Murphy. It would be helpful along the way to know how Perl compares Winkfield to other painters of similar technique such as Adami, or Patrick Caulfield, or the British sub-pop artist Douggie Fields.

The place for in-depth defense of artists is finally perhaps the monograph, and just as this review goes to press there has appeared a handsome volume devoted to Louisa Matthiasdottir, edited and authored in part by Perl.[2] Here at last the author of *Eyewitness*, who recently protested at a public interview that his motive for writing was a love of art, not controversy, may have the forum to spell out lovingly the visually embodied meanings of this painter's work, pull viewers into the thrilling logic of her painterly performances and demonstrate why the experience of her work is vital, contemporary, and one of expansive artistic con-

2 *Louisa Matthiasdottir*, with essays by Jed Perl, Martica Sawin, John Ashbery, and others, was recently published in Iceland. The book will be published in the U.S. in September by Hudson Hills Press (198 pages, $65).

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sciousness and intelligence. Worryingly though, on his first page, he laments that this artist whose work he considers a "defining achievement of postwar American art" is not in any major New York museums due to

> the sorry state of the contemporary art establishment in the United States, which is dominated by people who have been running after overpriced cheap thrills for so long that they can't recognize the real thing, even when it's staring them in the face.

However true that may be, it seems a wrong note on which to begin a much-needed first monograph on a painter, just as it seems a wrong note in *Eyewitness* when Perl says that Matthiasdottir

> may be misunderstood as cautiously conventional. But if you tune into what Matthiasdottir is doing, you may end up thinking that if this isn't part of the mainstream, then the mainstream can go to hell.

Perl knows that the "real thing" never in fact stares us self-evidently in the face. It always requires critical explication and its very value is to some extent actively constituted through that critical explication. That is not to imply (as may some postmodern theory and some postmodern art supported by it) that meaning and value do not inhere at all in the art object, that they are entirely the products of the commentaries that accompany it. But finally, the critic will best serve the work by giving as full an account as possible of its merits. And such an account, while necessarily drawing the viewer into the artist's world, will not require total and uncritical immersion in it (letting alternative views of art "go to hell"). Genuinely good works of art will not demand, either, such untriangulated assent. They will signal a consciousness of and a testing of their own limits and conventions. We are some way away, in *Eyewitness*, from getting such criticism, to persuade us that we are in the presence of such work.

Exposing shallowness

Margo DeMello
Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community.
Duke University Press,
248 pages, $16.95 paper

reviewed by Theodore Dalrymple

I was recently consulted in the prison in which I work by an inmate who was the proud father of two children. I asked him whether he still saw them: continued contact with their biological offspring being something of a rarity among the imprisoned paternal community. Instead of answering me directly, he rolled up his sleeves and pointed to two tattoos on his forearm, red hearts with scrolls across them bearing the names of his children—two tattoos among many others, needless to say. He hadn't seen either of his children for years, and had never contributed anything to their upkeep. Indeed, the idea that he should have done so was so completely alien to him and to the mores of the world in which he moved that the thought had never crossed his mind, even fleetingly. By contrast, he obviously believed that his tattoos were a sign of genuine devotion to his children. Their names were engraved, if not on his heart exactly, at least on hearts painfully engraved on his skin, and one could easily imagine a touching deathbed scene in which he would be reunited at last with his children and would there show them the tattoos as proof that he had never really forgotten or abandoned them. They would probably accept this as having been true, and therefore forgive him his dereliction of duty.

In fact, more than 95 percent of imprisoned white British criminals are tattooed. The statistical association between tattooing and criminality is very much stronger (with the exception of that between criminality and smoking) than that with any of the more conventionally investigated factors, such as broken homes, drug addiction, low intelligence, and poor edu-

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cational attainment. Show me a man's tattoos, and I will tell you his criminal record: British men, for example, who were incarcerated before the age of twenty-one usually bear a blue spot tattooed over one cheekbone, the criminal's equivalent of the old school tie, and a surprisingly large proportion of petty drug dealers have a tree-frog green cannabis leaf tattooed prominently on their person (sometimes on their face or neck), a clue whose meaning even a Dr. Watson might have little difficulty in deciphering.

The tattoo in modern society is thus a subject of greater interest and deeper significance than might at first be supposed, a subject worthy of reflection and a possible departure point for an assessment of the soul of modern man. Margo DeMello's *Bodies of Inscription* provides—often without really meaning to—some material for such an assessment. The author, an anthropologist, is herself a member of "the tattoo community," that is to say, is heavily tattooed, an avid reader of tattoo magazines, and an occasional attender of tattooing conventions. Her book, therefore, may be said to be in the tradition of participant observation. Despite the ominously deconstructionist title, she writes clearly and without jargon. This alone is quite a lot to be grateful for, even if her insights are largely superficial and the reader cannot rely on her as a guide to the deeper meaning of the things she describes.

In fact, her book is largely concerned with a comparatively recent phenomenon: the spread of tattooing to the American middle classes. This is also a British, and no doubt a European and Australian, phenomenon. The tattoo was once a resolutely proletarian form of body adornment which the middle classes regarded as symbolic of lower-class savagery, bad taste, and irresponsibility (the decision to be tattooed was, indeed, often taken while drunk in the company of other drunks). A middle-class person who had himself tattooed was thereby at once déclassé: a slide down the social scale more precipitous and serious than that brought about by a mésalliance, insofar as tattoos last longer, and are more difficult to obliterate, than marriages contracted in haste.

The tattoo is now seeping through society like ink through blotting paper. I first became aware of this seepage when I noticed an increasing number of young women in my hospital ward who bore tattoos, the tattoo having been until then an almost exclusively male embellishment. At first, women's tattoos were small and on parts of the anatomy that were usually covered by clothes; gradually these tentative essays in the direction of male proletarian savagery have been replaced by larger, more prominent and brazen declarations of allegiance to it.

Having crossed the gulf between the sexes, the tattoo then began its creep up the social scale. Young celebrities sported their tattoos when they were photographed for the newspapers, and before long I noticed that a number of university students among my patients also bore tattoos. This was unthinkable only a few years ago. Perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of this trend occurred when a young member of the British royal family exposed her pierced tongue (body piercing being a closely cognate phenomenon to tattooing) to the public.

According to Ms. DeMello, however, the middle-class tattoo differs from the proletarian variety. The latter is formulaic: when self-inflicted with a needle and India ink, it usually consists of simple symbols or acronyms, for example (in England) the letters ACAB, which stand either for "All Coppers Are Bastards" or "Always Carry A Bible," depending upon whether the person is asked about the meaning of the tattoo before or after an arrest. Proletarian tattoos done by professional tattooists are similarly formulaic: the customer simply choosing a well-established pattern from those on photographic display in the tattoo parlor.

If proletarian tattoos are ready-made, tattoos for the middle classes are individually tailored to their requirements by those

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whom the author insists upon calling "artists." It is perfectly true, of course, that tattooists sometimes display an astonishing skill in the production of images on, or in, their clients' skin, which are of photographic verisimilitude, and many even hold university degrees in fine arts, but skill alone, no matter how advanced or refined, does not make an artist. To think so is to confuse a necessary with a sufficient condition; indeed, there is very little more appalling than great skill in the service of bad taste and barbarism.

In any case, the individuality of the designs chosen for their tattoos by the middle classes is strictly relative. The iconography is limited and depressingly reminiscent of the "art" produced by prisoners, which is violent, crude, garish and pagan, however well-executed. It is a visual exhibition of modern superstition, the superstition of people who have strong emotions but weak minds and a very limited cultural and historical frame of reference.

Why do members of the middle classes now adorn themselves in this savage fashion? The author draws not only on her own experience, but also upon that of tattooists and their customers. She believes that tattoos have philosophical meaning for those who bear them. The philosophy in question is a witches' brew of new age "spiritualism," ecological paganism, elevation of the primitive, and vegetarianism. It is the kind of philosophy that emerges when religious feeling is no longer disciplined by religious ritual that is established by tradition and upheld by social pressure.

It is perfectly possible, however, to be a vegetarian, or even to believe in witchcraft, without resort to the tattoo parlor. What makes individuals choose to undergo the painful, expensive, and virtually irrevocable process of tattooing? Having listened to an unspecified number of tattooed members of the middle classes, the author identifies several motives, all of which struck me as unflatteringly revealing of the soul of modern man.

First there is the assertion of individuality. One of the author's informants says,

> [Being tattooed] separates me from anybody else. No one else has anything like what I have. I feel a little bit different from Joe Shmoe in the street, and I guess it makes me feel special.

This is infinitely sad. That a person's individuality should be made to depend upon so crude an outward sign as a tattoo is in fact an indication of the fragility of that person's identity. He must feel simultaneously overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people around him who make it so very difficult for him to differentiate himself from them, and an urgent necessity to do so. This necessity is all the more imperative in an age of celebrity, when fame and public notoriety are to so many people the only goals worth pursuing: indeed, when public adulation itself seems almost the sole guarantor of true personal existence. But their reach exceeds their grasp.

Of course, such outward signs of individuality as tattoos are inherently self-defeating. It cannot ever be long before someone has himself tattooed in a yet more startling, more "original" fashion (indeed, tattoo conventions regularly offer prizes for the "most unique" tattoo). But there is a deeper reason why such efforts at asserting one's unique individuality are pathetically bound to fail: for true individuality does not arise from a decision to be an individual. A man who decides to be an eccentric, and therefore to behave eccentrically, is not an eccentric at all, but an actor, and usually a bad one at that. A true eccentric is a man who behaves eccentrically because it simply does not occur to him to behave otherwise.

"Personal growth" is cited as another important motive for having oneself tattooed. It is said to be "empowering." A woman who had a bad marriage had herself tattooed with a wolf.

> I ended up getting this wolf, which to me was power and strength over all the abuse and all

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> the things that went on in my life. It was a sense of freedom. . . . I wanted it . . . to become myself.

Another woman said that her tattoo was something she did, that she brought into being, as if the fact that it was hers were a sufficient guarantee of its worth.

What is striking about these "tattoo narratives" (as the author calls them) is their vacuous egoism. The interlocutors speak, and appear to think, in pure psychobabble, that debased and vague confessional language that allows people to imagine they are baring their souls when in fact they are exposing their shallowness. This is something the author does not notice because she herself belongs to the psychobabble culture. One cannot but feel sorrow for people who think that by permanently disfiguring themselves they are somehow declaring their independence or expressing their individuality. The tattoo has a profound meaning: the superficiality of modern man's existence.

The author entirely misses the cultural significance of the spread of tattoos into the middle classes, even though one of her interlocutors, a teacher at a university, gives her a strong clue:

> I was saying, "Fuck you, school, and I don't really care if you know I have a tattoo." I also at this time started getting pierced because basically I'm taking my anger out on this school. . . . I knew it would freak them out, which gave me no small amount of pleasure.

Here we see the bodily consequence of an intellectual climate that has long extolled opposition and hostility to what exists as the only honorable and ethical stand to take towards it. Of course, such an attitude is fundamentally ahistorical and lacking in respect for the achievements of the past, and only people who live in an eternal, egoistic present moment could adopt it. (The eternity of the present moment is, of course, the key to modern shallowness.) The tattoo is thus the art form of the cultural vandal, and it is no accident, as the Marxists used to say, that the cultural vandal's views should almost always be expressed with inarticulate sub-demotic vulgarity.

It is also no accident that some members of the middle classes should have adopted a typically proletarian form of bodily adornment as a badge not only of independence, but also of liberal virtue. A tattoo establishes them as tolerant, open-minded, and sympathetic towards those below them in the social scale: the highest virtues of which they can conceive. The tattoo thus appeals to the kind of modern bourgeois who believes that foulness of language is a token of purity of heart, or at least of sincerity. The tattoo, like the constant resort to the swear-word, is an attack on bourgeois propriety, and as such a demonstration of largeness of heart and generosity of spirit.

Of course, this antinomianism (itself so tiresomely bourgeois) has a tinny ring. I am reminded of the recent obituary of a British pop star in *The Daily Telegraph* (the fact that this newspaper, once the favorite reading matter of retired admirals pickled in port, should carry obituaries of pop stars at all is itself a cultural shift of some significance). The subject of the obituary was said to have been so irritated by what he considered the false gentility of the school he attended that he forever after used the demotic speech of South London. In other words, he adopted, in the name of authenticity, a form of language that was not his own and did not come naturally to him. The fate of all people who imitate others to achieve authenticity is to live a lie.

Besides, the bourgeois who has himself tattooed is, as this book indicates, at least as anxious to distinguish himself from the real proletarian as he is to identify with him. The tattoo is thus to the modern bourgeois what playing shepherdess was to Marie Antoinette. The woman whose tattoo was supposed to say "Fuck you" to her university did not really want to become the janitor of her faculty building, and probably would have very little to say to him.

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Egalitarians usually have a very strong sense of hierarchy.

Bodies of Inscription is a superficial examination of a social phenomenon of considerable cultural significance, but it will nonetheless be of great interest to people who know how to read between the lines.

The dark horse

Nicholas Murray
World Enough and Time:
The Life of Andrew Marvell.
St. Martin's Press, 294 pages, $27.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

If, in 1658, you had been a spectator of the funeral procession of Oliver Cromwell—strictly speaking a memorial procession, the body having been buried two months previously—you could have seen, in the space of a few seconds, John Milton, Andrew Marvell, and John Dryden walking past. Has any English monarch had such a distinguished train of mourners as this republican? Milton, the eldest of the trio, was born in 1608, and Dryden, the youngest, did not die until 1700: you would have been looking, all unknowingly, at English poetry in the seventeenth century. Milton had brought out his first collected volume in 1645, and Dryden was just about to make his debut with an elegy on Cromwell. As usual, Marvell (1621–1678) was the dark horse; his collected poems appeared only posthumously, in 1681, and were little known until 1921 when T. S. Eliot wrote an essay marking what he called, in a characteristically deadpan phrase, "the tercentenary of the former member [i.e., Member of Parliament] for Hull." Marvell scholarship has proceeded apace, in contrast to Marvell biography; Nicholas Murray's is the first full-length life since that of Pierre Legouis in 1928.[1] The delay is not surprising, for Marvell is not an immediately rewarding subject. He has a habit of disappearing from the record at vital moments, and of keeping silent when he does turn up. He was, wrote John Aubrey, "very modest, and of few words. He had not a general acquaintance." Personally isolated, he is also poetically inscrutable; there are few poets whose tone of voice is harder to catch.

The son of a Puritan Anglican clergyman, he passed from Grammar School to Trinity College, Cambridge, at the age of twelve. His mother died when he was seventeen, and two years later he lost his father in a drowning accident. There is no evidence that he ever married, although his housekeeper claimed after his death that she had secretly been his wife, a claim which William Empson, in his *Using Biography*, is the only critic of stature to accept. We have no picturesque anecdotes of Marvell's childhood and youth, only calumnies by his later enemies. Better attested is the tradition that he was briefly recruited by the Jesuits while an undergraduate, a startling possibility given his lifelong hostility to Catholicism, which found its ugliest expression in *An Account of the Growth of Popery* (1677); perhaps this was a similar experience to that of more modern Cambridge intellectuals who have spent years trying to live down their adolescent flirtations with the Communist Party.

Marvell left Cambridge in 1641 and, apart from a brief appearance in London the following year, disappears—traveling abroad learning languages, scholars agree, though whether on the Grand Tour or as a tutor is disputed—until 1647, thus conveniently absenting himself during the crucial events of the Civil War. On his return he moved in royalist circles and penned some slight Cavalier lyrics; from 1650 to 1657 he tutored the children of staunchly Cromwellian families; in 1657, with his appointment as Milton's assistant in the equivalent of the modern cabinet office, he moved into the heart of the

1 Like many others, Mr. Murray does not appear to know Michael Craze's *The Life and Lyrics of Andrew Marvell* (Macmillan, 1979), which contains a brief biographical outline at odds with a number of Murray's conclusions, as well as a stimulating scholarly commentary on the major poems.

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republican government. Yet at the Restoration he not only escaped severe punishment (unlike Milton, who was temporarily imprisoned and was lucky not to be executed) but, within three years, was sufficiently in the royal favor to be sent on an important diplomatic mission to Moscow, Sweden, and Denmark—an eighteen-month journey about which he characteristically said absolutely nothing and for which Mr. Murray has to rely on the record of one of his companions. From 1659 until his death he sat as Hull's MP in a succession of parliaments.

All this might be, and has been, interpreted as the career of a political turncoat, ready to sacrifice principle to survival. Mr. Murray, however, has a subtler and more satisfying explanation, which harks back to Eliot's essay and illuminates the art as well as the life. Eliot admires in Marvell's best poems "an equipoise, a balance and proportion of tones," which confer upon them classic status. Mr. Murray elaborates: "His hesitations, his attentions to nuance, his willingness to reflect both sides, his holding of the line for contemplation, may have been not an evasion but a gesture of aesthetic responsibility"—and of political responsibility too, for although he "accepted as a fait accompli the restoration of constitutional monarchy he remained a member of the opposition to the court party," particularly during the 1670s when he felt uneasy about the rising influence of Catholicism (the king's brother had become a convert in 1669) and weary of Charles II's incessant demands for money. The vicious mock speech, purportedly by the king to the House of Commons, which Marvell wrote anonymously in 1675 and arranged to be placed on the Commons benches as MPs arrived for debate, is not the work of a toady. "The nation hates you already for giving me so much," the king is made to say, "and I'll hate you too, if you do not give me more. So that if you stick not to me, you must not have a friend in England."

This brings us at last to the writings. Marvell wrote only a small number of poems, of which a still smaller number are widely known. They are difficult to date with precision, but there seems to be a broad division between the lyrics, which belong largely to before or during the Civil War, and the satires, which are post-Restoration. Try as he may, Mr. Murray cannot make us warm to the latter. Topical poetry rarely wears well, and the lyrics' miraculous union of airiness and weight has thickened and coarsened in the satiric couplets, which are all too prophetic of Dryden: the court is giving way to the metropolis, with its tiresome smugness and its would-be worldly wisdom which is actually very small-minded.

Marvell's prose works, too, are often satirical or polemical and are difficult to read with pleasure, while his letters, of which a surprisingly large quantity survives, are distinctly unexciting. Many were written in connection with his parliamentary duties, and he lived in stirring times, but was the last man to wax eloquent; indeed, he never once bothers to tell his constituents that he has spoken in debate, and only once canvasses their opinion on an issue of the day. One has some sympathy with the eighteenth-century citizen of Hull, William Skinner, who owned a number of the letters but "gave them to the pastry-maid to put under pie-bottoms." Marvell's achievement must largely rest upon the lyrics and the "Horatian Ode." True, his poems, as Mr. Murray says, "are almost never a naked utterance or blurt of feeling," but they stem, as Eliot pointed out, from a tradition of Latin and English neoclassical poetry whose finest representative in the previous generation had been Jonson. They are cool but not cold; their business is to weigh, to evaluate and to understand, not to rhapsodize. In "Upon Appleton House," he refers to the "holy mathematics" of architecture, and whilst Mr. Murray is right to suspect that Hobbesian materialism might have had little attraction for him, Marvell's neoplatonism is not mystical after the manner of Traherne or Vaughan, but has a strain of austere rationalism running through it.

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Philip Larkin, the only other poet Hull can boast, wrote of the combination of "hallucinatory images" and "sudden sincerities" in Marvell's work. This evokes his best-known poems such as "To his Coy Mistress" or "The Garden," but it also occurs in poems to which Mr. Murray gives little or no attention. He omits, for instance, "The Definition of Love," which develops metaphors drawn from logic and geometry to the following heart-rending conclusion:

> Therefore the love which us doth bind,
> But Fate so enviously debars,
> Is the conjunction of the mind,
> And opposition of the stars.

It is vain to seek to identify a mistress in that "us"; the pronoun is universal. We are all in this tragic predicament, our desires frustrated by destiny.

Or take another example, from "The Mower Against Gardens," one of a sequence of four poems using the figure of a mower, which rank among Marvell's finest. A garden, the poem says, is a bastard creation, its "forbidden mixtures" the result of human meddling with natural simplicity. (Mr. Murray relevantly refers to the nature/nurture debate in *The Winter's Tale*.) After a succession of conceits—flowers of artificial color like women with too much make-up, stoneless cherries, the eunuchs in the harem—the poem suddenly drops its tone of clever mockery:

> 'Tis all enforced: the fountain and the grot;
> While the sweet fields do lie forgot:
> Where willing Nature does to all dispense
> A wild and fragrant innocence.

The mouth lingers caressingly over the second line. In the lament for the lost innocence of the open meadow there is something almost unbearably poignant, yet it swells out from the poem rather than being imposed upon it.

There is more ominous imagery later in the sequence: the central figure in "Damon the Mower," gashing himself on his own scythe, binds up the wound with herbs, reflecting that a cure for the wounds from his mistress's eyes is not so easily come by, or so welcome when it comes: "For, Death, thou art a mower too."

That particular mower cut Marvell down on 16 August 1678. He contracted a malarial infection en route from Hull to London, and the bungling of the doctor who was called in to treat him seems to have hastened his end. It was darkly assumed that he had been poisoned by the Jesuits. The church in which he was buried—St. Giles-in-the-Fields: Damon would have approved—was rebuilt in the eighteenth century, so his precise resting place is lost. A memorial tablet, dating from 1764, praises his conjunction of "peculiar graces of wit and learning" and "strength of judgement" and sums him up as "a strenuous asserter of the constitution, laws and liberties of England." His pleas for political and religious tolerance (except for Catholics) made him a hero of English liberalism in succeeding centuries when his literary reputation languished.

Mr. Murray concludes that "Marvell's is not a poetry of personality." No, indeed; it rests upon much more solid foundations. One is tempted to quote Eliot again: "Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Marvell's voice is audible, though it is overlaid by the voices of many other poets whom he quotes, parodies, alludes to, or imitates: you have to listen hard. Nor must you expect intimacy; neither his temperament nor his religious beliefs inclined him to the confessional.

Shorter notices

Robert Conquest Demons Don't.
London Magazine Editions, 60 pages, £7.95

In his introduction to *New Lines* (1956), the anthology that fostered the Movement, the British poet and historian Robert Conquest observed that

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> in the 1940s the mistake was made of giving the Id, a sound player on the percussion side under a strict conductor, too much of a say in the doings of the orchestra as a whole. . . . The most glaring fault awaiting correction when the new period opened was the omission of the necessary intellectual component from poetry.

Emotion in poetry, Conquest cautioned, had begun to crowd out such mainstays as "rational structure and comprehensible language." Mindful that poetry cannot live by the bread of intellect alone, Conquest argued that reason, salted with experience and leavened by passion, remains the staple of distinguished writing, verse and prose alike. As *New Lines* showed—with its selection of work by Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Conquest, and others—a balance could still be struck between "human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, [and] language," as Coleridge put it. In his seventh collection of poems, *Demons Don't*, Conquest manages such equipoise even today—no small feat given the levels of emotionalism and opacity that poets have achieved since the middle Fifties. With Conquest's characteristic wit, an epigraph announces the book's no-nonsense contents: "Lyric, novella, satire, ode/ In many a mood and many a mode/ And not a single one in code . . ."

Of Conquest's many moods and modes, two seem foremost here: a sometimes unabashedly erotic love poetry and a well-tuned way with light verse. Take as an example of the former the postcoital ruminations of "Beyond Them":

> For through her smile's
> Full calm there glowed, quick, unexpected,
> A coherence of irrefutables.
>
> Not just her cream-bronze candor displayed
> On the coverlet's cream-citron
> Chenille as early eventide
> Gently shone through the soft curtain.
>
> Not just the high, hand-filling breasts,
> Or vision sweeping the tactility of
> The smooth, hand-smoothing thigh-and-waist's
> Concord of curves. Not even love.

Memory records the scene, the poem goes on to suggest, much the way a painter seeks to "fix the exact point" of his observation "to some cool attitude of truth," in an image that remains "unfadingly engraved/ In the scan of his mind's eye, year after year." Needless to say, the poem itself constitutes just such a bid to preserve the moment.

For anyone unfamiliar with Conquest's exuberant and scurrilous correspondence with Philip Larkin (or Larkin's possible characterization of him and Amis in "Letter to a Friend about Girls"), Conquest dispels any residual suspicions of prudery in "A Tasting": "One should satisfy neither/ The emotional heavy breather/ Nor the uptight, unsexed/ Sniffer of dried text." Conquest's red-blooded approach to Eros in these poems refreshes rather than repels. For someone critics have accused of blokishness, Conquest writes with great subtlety and often with great tenderness. In the elegiac "Only Natural," a young man learns that the woman he's recently begun a sexual relationship with is moving away. After sitting through an excruciating sendoff dinner with her family, the man endures his lover's overly formal good-bye before exiting alone:

> Outside. The moon's gone: but his
> Sight after a few moments adjusts
> To the underbrush's intricacies
> Of shade, the high overcast's
>
> Smooth smudged charcoal, the upflung
> Foliate antennae edging more sharply
> Their arched life form, as he treads along
> Its track to the cliff-top, to descry
>
> The northern ness's distant chalk-face
> Now an almost livid non-pallor,
> And West the sleek panther-black sea's
> Slow pulse. . . .

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"He's hurt," Conquest goes on to say, but he needn't have. The desolation in the tone gives the scene away, weedy language creating a tenebrous underbrush of emotion, as the boy confronts the livid face of the ness appearing to him in the dark.

Equally assured in a variety of registers (a token of his mastery), Conquest attacks the same subject matter from a decidedly different angle in "Lost Love":

> "The climate of the heart"—Young men
> Who think they won't survive it when
> That organ takes the icy blast
> May find that once the winter's past
> Their blood's been only slightly thinned
> By the unprevailing wind.

In his piece on the limerick, "There Was a Young Fellow," from his exemplary collection of literary essays *The Abomination of Moab* (1979), Conquest japes that "[Hilaire] Belloc makes it an accusation against women that they 'confuse levity with frivolity', but if so there are many effeminate men." The same confusion besets readers who would denigrate light verse as trivial. A. A. Milne, whom Kingsley Amis quoted in the introduction to his *New Oxford Book of English Light Verse*, sets the record straight with regard to poetic "lightness": "It is not bastard poetry on a frivolous theme. It is true humor expressing itself in perfectly controlled rhyme and rhythm." Occasionally, Conquest's humor tends toward a clarifying biliousness, as in his epigram "The Logic of Revolution":

> Ow! A great acorn just fell on my head!
> Cut down that oak; plant a upas instead!

We laugh, ruefully. The exotic upas sounds downright Carrollean beside the stalwart oak, until we discover that the name means "poison tree" in Malay, so-called for its use in tainting arrow heads. (Upas-tipped levity also governs the tone of Conquest's great limerick "Progress," which begins "There was a great Marxist called Lenin.") As Conquest puts it in "Whenever," some fifty years ago Wyndham Lewis trumpeted that his age required "a tongue that naked goes/ Without more fuss than Dryden's or Defoe's." With an ensuing litany of man's latest shortcomings, Conquest makes it brutally clear that, "even more than Lewis's," our age calls for a capable satirist. Not many contemporary poets, it seems, are interested in assuming the mantle, though the few that have done so deserve our thanks—Tom Disch, Turner Cassity, and Robert Conquest.

—David Yezzi

Colin Thubron In Siberia.
HarperCollins, 287 pages, $26

Rudolph, Dasher, Blitzen, and the rest don't come around Potalovo much anymore. The village, located north of the Arctic Circle, was bullied into restyling itself as a reindeer collective in Krushchev's day, but since then the animals' pastures have been killed off by acid rain.

Near Vladivostok, a woman complains that, of the salary owed her husband the previous year, one-half of it went ignored altogether and the other was paid in glass: "Some customers," she explains, "had paid the firm in sheet glass, so it was just passed on to the employees."

The above are but two of the dispatches and vignettes, so grotesque as to be half-comical, with which Colin Thubron peppers his new travelogue, the latest—and presumably the last—in a series that began in 1983 with *Among the Russians* (published here as *Where Nights Are Longest*) and continued in 1994 with *The Lost Heart of Asia*. Thubron journeyed through Siberia in order, as he puts it, "for a moment to witness its passage through the wreckage of Communism," and a pretty sight it wasn't. The poisoned rivers, the jerrybuilt apartment blocks sagging into ruin, the people dazed and rudderless and drunk: all the familiar fixtures of post-Soviet life are to be found here, sharply if depressingly rendered. As Thubron formulates it, the bitter

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irony about Siberia is that "Everything achieved under slavery . . . was being destroyed by freedom."

Any voyage through Siberia necessarily consists, in large part, of a ghoulish and supremely melancholy Grand Tour of horror spots, places where the Russian genius for cruelty, both czarist and Communist, flared up with special brilliance. Of these, Thubron's itinerary features two of the most notorious: the coal mines of Vorkuta, "an evil jewel in the Gulag crown," and the gold mines of Kolyma, where men were reduced to licking wheelbarrow grease for nourishment and an estimated two million perished. Other lowlights include Omsk, where Dostoevsky was imprisoned for four years and where Solzhenitsyn, on his way to a camp in Kazakhstan, was briefly stuffed in a dungeon; Yekaterinburg, where Nicholas II and his family were butchered; and the exile-sites of both Lenin (Shushenskoe) and Stalin (Turukhansk). In Siberia, it seems, not even objects are immune to persecution: the territory's very first exile, Thubron writes, was

> not a man, but a seven-hundred-pound bell from Uglich, which rang an insurrectionary alarm on the murder of the imperial heir in 1581. The usurper Boris Gudunov had the bell publicly flogged and its tongue ripped out, and ordered the citizens of Uglich to drag it over the Urals to Tobolsk, where it was forbidden to ring.

More particular to Thubron's account is his obsession—rather perplexing in an agnostic Englishman—with Russian religious faith. Spirituality in Siberia blossomed, he found, under an almost American efflorescence of guises, from the Orthodox church and that of the Old Believers (a dissenting and long-persecuted sect); to shamanism in Tuva; to Buddhism among the Buryats (a Mongol people); and even, perhaps most exotic of all in this context, to Baptism.

In Siberia is distinguished as well by its author's nearly masochistic travel habits. Thubron would, on a whim, peel off into the middle of nowhere and sometimes get seriously stuck there—he was marooned in Potalovo for weeks—but his misery is our gain. His bulletins from these hyperborean hamlets strike just the right tonal balance between disgust at the old system and solicitude for those who groan beneath its rubble. And his prose is a precision instrument, able to conjure up, with a few brisk yet nuanced strokes, the whole atmosphere and sadness of a place:

> Space is the sterile luxury of Novosibirsk. In summer it hangs in vacant stillness over the flattened boulevards. In winter it starts to move, and howls between the islanded buildings and across the squares. The city is a claustrophobe's dream. Its roads sweep empty between miles of apartment-blocks and Stalinist hulks moaning with prefabricated pilasters and cornices. As for the people, there are one and a half million of them, but they seem lost in space. They trickle along the pavements to work. You become one of them, reduced. The traffic, too, seems sparse and far away, meandering over a delta of stone and tarmac.

Unassailably well written though it is, *In Siberia* seems to me a step down from the superb *Among the Russians*. (*The Lost Heart of Asia* I've not read.) Thubron's style, whether chastened by age or by the bleakness of his subject, has become terser and less lyrical, with the result that there are fewer striking passages here. Another problem—this one beyond Thubron's control—is that *In Siberia*, undertaken as it was well after the fall of Communism, lacks the tension and menace that made *Among the Russians* so tautly immediate. In 1980, when he ventured by car through western Russia, Thubron was dogged by the KGB and had foisted upon him a series of amusingly preposterous official guides. His wrangles with these bossy, unshakeable chaperones made for compulsive reading, and so did his encounters, often quite moving, with ordinary citizens who, their hospitality prevailing over their state-inculcated xenophobia, took Thubron into their homes and tried

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their level best to pickle him (the man must have a Teflon liver still to be alive). In the late 1990s, by contrast, Thubron met with little resistance to his snoopings, and *In Siberia* is correspondingly slacker in feel. Thubron seems almost excited when, in Yakutsk, the hotel concierge barks at him to register with the local police, whose office he finds littered with rat turds.

Apropos of vermin, HarperCollins has, I can't resist pointing out, once again managed disgracefully to soil a book. Having long since established its mastery of the garden-variety typo, this Keystone press has now hit on a fascinating new way to annoy readers and mortify authors: the misplaced diacritical. Every single mark here is set far too high, so that, for example, the circumflex in "Lancôme" pierces the underbelly of a hapless letter "a" in the line above—a cosmetic flaw, but one reflective of HarperCollins's utter disdain for care and quality. If only there existed a special island in the Gulag archipelago for incompetent publishers.

—Ben Downing

Sondra Kathryn Wilson, editor
The Crisis Reader.
Modern Library, 422 pages, $14.95

Sondra Kathryn Wilson, editor
The Opportunity Reader.
Modern Library, 538 pages, $14.95

Sondra Kathryn Wilson, editor
The Messenger Reader.
Modern Library, 418 pages, $14.95

For nearly ten years, our Negro [artists] have been "confessing" the distinctive sordidness and triviality of Negro life, and making an exhibition of their own unhealthy imagination, in the name of frankness and sincerity. Frankness is no virtue in itself, however, as any father will tell his son, nor is sincerity. A dog or savage is "sincere" about his bestialities, but he is not therefore raised above them. . . . If sincerity is to justify one in exploiting the lowest traits of human nature; and in ignoring that sense in man which Cicero says differentiates him from other animals—his sense of what is decent—then sincerity is to pander to a torpid animalism.

William Bennett explaining rap music? Not exactly. The above passage was put to paper by a black scholar and psychologist named Allison Davis, and it appeared in August 1928 in *The Crisis: a Record of the Darker Races*. This magazine was published during the Harlem Renaissance by the NAACP (although still around, the magazine is no longer relevant), and Davis's piece is one of the offerings in *The Crisis Reader: Stories, Poetry and Essays from the NAACP's* Crisis *Magazine*. The volume was published last year and has been followed by two more volumes: *The Opportunity Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the Urban League's* Opportunity *Magazine* and just recently *The Messenger Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the* Messenger *Magazine*. They are part of the Modern Library's continuing Harlem Renaissance series.

The main thing that one brings away from these volumes is not so much the splendor of the fiction or poetry—although it's obvious that Langston Hughes was one of America's most original poets, most of the fiction can't hold a light to the masters of the period. No, the revelations here are the essays, which show that there was once a time, before Jesse Jackson and Cornel West, when the black community—even the parts of it that were steeped in the often febrile impulses of 1920s modernism—adhered to standards of decency and conduct. Even the Communists knew their manners. The *Messenger* was officially dedicated to spreading world socialism, but upon opening the compilation of its writings one finds not the bloodthirsty mumbo jumbo made famous by West and Al Sharpton, but, well, family values. To be sure, one J. A. Rogers condemns the obsequious, pre-revolutionary black as "a tyrant of tyrants" and "dog-like creature," but the overall impression was that even the revolutionaries closely adhered to high literary standards and bourgeois values. In "The Black and Tan

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Cabaret—America's Most Democratic Institution," the putative revolutionary Chandler Owen spends as much time defending the "moral caliber" of the cabaret patrons as he does attacking the snobbery of those who look down on the clubs.

It's been argued that the upheavals of the 1960s were seeded in the 1920s, when a country spiritually sick over a mindless war began to question received assumptions, and that were it not for the Depression and World War II, the Sixties would have happened a lot sooner. In this sense, the upper-class blacks who turned up their noses to jazz, blues, and the Harlem Renaissance may have been anticipating the cultural collapse of the rock and roll era. The problem is that these critics didn't appreciate the art of many people now considered masters. Allison Davis claimed that Harlem Renaissance writers depicted blacks as "having no self-respect," but he also insisted that Langston Hughes, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence were smut-peddlers sullied with excessive "naturalism." And, as Langston Hughes noted about the Black Washingtonian Jean Toomer's novel *Cane* (1925), no one in "the cultured colored society of Washington . . . seemed to know anything about the book and cared less."

Indeed, according to the late historian Constance Green, many upper-class blacks thought such books as Toomer's *Cane* and Rudolph Fisher's *City of Refuge* were too "black," depicting characters without refinement or education. The black writer Dixon Wecter blasted such attitudes from the Black upper crust, attacking them for their "pseudo culture, their slavish devotion to Nordic standards, their snobbishness, their detachment from the Negro masses, and their vast sense of importance to themselves." Perhaps the most splenetic condemnations of the Harlem Renaissance came in 1927 from Kelly Miller, the chairman of the sociology department at Washington's famous black college, Howard University. In 1926 Carl Van Vechten, who was white, wrote a novel called *Nigger Heaven* that claimed Harlem as the home of black culture. Miller fired back in *Opportunity*, in a piece reprinted in the compilation: "The New Negro of whom we have heard so much is nothing but the old [southern] Negro exposed to the Harlem environment." *Nigger Heaven* was

> merely an artistic portrayal of the Harlem Negro, in his gayer mood for joy and jazz . . . the Negro life in Harlem is mainly effervescence and froth without seriousness or solid supporting basis. The riot of frolic and frivolity is characteristic of Babylon on the verge of destruction rather than of Heaven, the blissful abode of tradition.

Would that Miller were alive today to take on gangsta rap.

—*Mark Gauvreau Judge*

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September. Readers are invited to visit *The New Criterion*'s web page at www.newcriterion.com, where we plan to post new material from time to time this summer.

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Notebook

Mark Van Doren remembered

by Jeffrey Hart

Above the columns of Butler Library at Columbia University, inscribed in the stone frieze, you read permanent testimony that some writers are in fact important: Homer, Virgil, Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Spinoza, Aquinas . . . These names are representative of importance, they are not a limiting "list" as relativists sneer. Butler Library stands across a series of geometrical terraces and walks from Charles Follen McKim's Low Library, which dominates the whole scene with its ten Ionic columns and low dome inspired by the Pantheon in Rome. The Columbia campus, designed integrally by McKim, Mead & White, represents architecturally a permanent defiance of the also permanent Scythians and Philistines. And you can argue that this campus is more convincing architecturally than the neo-Gothic of Princeton and Yale or the neo-Georgian of Harvard and Dartmouth.

To my college junior's gaze, no professor was more in harmony with what all this represented than Mark Van Doren. His principal course in 1950–51 was called "The Narrative Art," which extended through the academic year and in which we read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy*, Genesis and Exodus, *Don Quixote*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Castle*, and *The Trial*. My fellow students in the course had had the benefit of the year-long freshman course Humanities I–II, still required at Columbia, which begins in the Fall with the *Iliad* and ends in the Spring with a modern novel, often *Crime and Punishment*. (I entered Columbia as a junior having quit Dartmouth after two years to work for a publisher. I was persuaded to try Columbia, but had missed Humanities I–II.) As a student once put it colloquially to me, in Humanities I–II and in Van Doren's courses he was confident he was dealing with the "first team." And at the very least all students felt that they were engaged with important matters. The thought that held the syllabus together was Van Doren's idea that all great narrative has in it some representation of the divine. Of course in Kafka this is the presence of the absent, the *deus abscondita*. And Van Doren confessed that he could not find the divine in *Don Quixote*. I remember trying to argue that it is in the transcendent calm of Cervantes's prose, which looks with divine equanimity on the hugger-mugger of all that passes below. I also had a bit of a run-in with this favorite professor when he remarked in class that the Soviet Union was "just like Elizabethan England." I asked, no doubt a nuisance, about a Soviet Shakespeare, even about a Soviet Spenser. He allowed that "just like" was a mistake. He meant experimentation and productive chaos. But more of this in a moment.

I took Van Doren's courses as a junior and senior, and later joined him as a colleague in the English department. A poet and critic with a wide general audience—he reviewed frequently and was on the radio

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program "Invitation to Learning" with Jacques Barzun, Clifton Fadiman, Irwin Edman, and others—he had a considerable life outside the university. He was a public man, at the university but not of it, not a don. He was a man of letters, and an exquisitely polite gentleman. Indeed, he was even a country squire in Connecticut. In the opinion of a great many students who went through Columbia, he was the best classroom teacher they had ever experienced.

Though the term is difficult to define, Van Doren was conspicuously American. If there is a touch of embarrassment about using that term, everyone will admit, I suppose, that Anthony Eden or Jacques Chirac would not be mistaken for Americans. Or that there would be no doubt about Whitman or Lincoln. Anyway, Van Doren's face was beautifully lined and he had strong farmer's hands. You knew that he was quite conscious of the way he looked, rather as you knew Robert Frost was. They both used their appearance as part of their public power. I sensed that Van Doren knew the effect of those farmer's hands when he gripped the top of the lectern. He was no city slicker. He had grown up in smalltown Illinois (Lincoln, also of Illinois, was his principal American hero) and he had gone to the University of Illinois. With the Midwest in his voice, he spoke slowly enough so that you could think for a moment about what he had said. He did not mind moments of silence in the classroom while he thought and we tried to. He had written his master's thesis at Illinois on Thoreau, and much admired him, as he also did Emerson, and like Emerson he was good with an aphorism.

Yet, signally, Van Doren had written his Ph.D. thesis at Columbia on John Dryden. It had been reviewed very favorably by none other than T. S. Eliot in the TLS, and Eliot had incorporated much of this review into his *Homage to John Dryden*. I once asked Van Doren what his favorite lyric poem was, and he did not name one by an American but instead Dryden's exquisite "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham." After all has been said and done in modern criticism, Van Doren's book on Dryden remains the best. I also rate very highly his books on Shakespeare and on epic poetry. Considering that Van Doren had also won a Pulitzer Prize for his own poetry, it was impossible for an undergraduate not to be in awe of this man.

A Van Doren class was not a lecture but a conversation. If, for the moment, the students were not up to joining the conversation, it turned into a conversation with himself. He taught with a certain relaxed casualness, as if continuing a conversation that had already been going on somewhere else. He would draw an individual student into it, and the student thus elected could not get off the hook. Apparently simple questions had a way of turning into complicated ones. It often seemed that he was actually able to create intelligence in a student. Responding to Van Doren's questions, the student would find himself saying things he had never thought about Helen and Achilles—she invincible and he not quite—or about the power of literature for Paolo and Francesca, or about Abraham as a bargainer with God.

Van Doren favored the greatest writers for his courses. (No one in the Fifties doubted that there were such things as great writers.) Part of the classroom drama thus consisted of Van Doren measuring himself against them, trying to rise somewhere near their peaks of intelligence. Not surprisingly, Van Doren wrote splendidly about education. The following passage from his *Autobiography* (1958) gives a sense both of the substance and the style of his teaching:

> My purpose was to examine the ways in which the greatest tellers had put divine things and human things together. The ultimate dimension, I suggested, was given to narrative by the presence in it of gods or their equivalent. In the case of Cervantes, I promised that it would be difficult to say what the equivalent was, yet I promised it was there, or else *Don Quixote* would not be the supreme novel it is. Reading it slowly in preparation for the

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> course, listening to every word of it in Motteaux's joyful translation, I had fallen hopelessly in love with it, as I continue every year to do. . . . The Bible became for me a boundless world of wonder, terror, wisdom, and delight. Dante and Kafka, the one finishing his thought, the other unable to do so, I likewise discovered to be bottomless in meaning as well as brilliant, with ten thousand details that cannot tarnish. Homer, I need not say, remained for me what Dante said he was, the sovereign poet.

I regret to say that there Van Doren nodded, as he very rarely did about such things. In the *Inferno* it is Virgil, not Dante, who calls Homer the "sovereign poet." He was obviously sovereign for Virgil, who incorporated both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into the *Aeneid*, depending upon Homer's presence to advance his meanings through comparison and contrast. In the *Aeneid*, for example, as Aeneas runs war-like Turnus through, homebody Hector is returning to kill Achilles. Virgil votes for civilization, rejecting the endless destruction-creation of the Homeric world. When Dante has Virgil call Homer the sovereign poet we understand that Virgil has not had a chance to read *The Divine Comedy*.

I would like here to cite another passage about Van Doren's teaching because it establishes so well the relationship he was able to create with his students in the classroom.

> If I speak of the students last, it is not merely because they were the crucial persons with whom I spent my time, as must be true in any college; it is also because no way exists of describing what goes on in a classroom once the door is closed. What goes on is a kind of secret between him who stands and those who sit.

He continued with an important reflection that points to the essence of his practice as a teacher:

> From the beginning, I assumed experience in freshmen. Perhaps the chief difficulty consisted in my assumption that nothing was too difficult for the students. Freshmen have had more experience than they are given credit for. They have been born, have had parents, had brothers and sisters, been in love, been jealous, been angry, been ambitious, been tired, been hungry, been happy and unhappy, been aware of justice and injustice. Well, the great writers handled just such things, and they did so in basic human language men must use whenever they feel and think. The result, if no teacher prevents its happening, was that freshmen learned about themselves. And so did the teachers, at least if they read and talked like men of the world, simply and humbly, without assumptions of academic superiority.

This is a passage of apparent, but only apparent, simplicity. In truth it has extraordinary richness. Van Doren had all the university standing anyone could hope for. Yet he never assumed authority in the classroom; he earned it in every session.

In his discourse, he talked "like a man of the world," in "basic human language." That is why his favorite lyric was "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham," Dryden's triumph of perfect lucidity. I'm sure that must have been a close call, thinking of Jonson, Marvell, and Frost. Van Doren was a classicist about language: the essence not the decoration—Caesar, Seneca, and Catullus, not Cicero; Dryden, not Milton. He was uninfected by academic prose, and one can imagine what he would say about the stagey decadence of much academic writing today.

There was an American, even Lincolnian frontier feeling for equality about Van Doren. I sense it, for example, in the following fine passage, both in the language and in his relationship to the greatest story tellers, speaking as if they were students in his class:

> My great friends do not know me.
> Hamlet in the halls,
> Achilles by the river, and Don Quixote
> Feasting with the Duke see no one there
> Like me, Mark Van Doren, who grows daily

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Older, while they look not, change not,
Die not, save deaths their masters made.

I mentioned earlier Van Doren's classroom remark in 1950 that the Soviet Union was "just like Elizabethan England" and would like to add something to the general sense that exists about Van Doren's politics, namely that he was a fellow traveler. I do recall his fury in 1950 regarding Truman, whom he characterized as ignorant and unfit for the presidency. At the time, I was unaware that he had supported Henry Wallace in 1948. I have since heard the testimony of the poet and translator Richard Howard that Van Doren fervently asserted the innocence of Alger Hiss after he had been convicted and I know that he participated in the agitprop Waldorf Peace Conference in 1949.

When I got out of Naval Intelligence in 1956 and began to teach in the Columbia English department, our relations were cordial enough and his sense of equality genuine enough that he did not object when I asked him about all this. He replied quite candidly that he had been "taken in." Well, taken in by what or whom? My own guess, for what it is worth, is by the powerful influence of his close friend Scott Buchanan, president of St. John's College in Annapolis, a thoroughgoing classicist to be sure, but very far to the left politically. Classicism can comport with the hatred of corporations and of business, and certainly can be alienated from democracy. A comical history could be written of fellow-traveling classicists, for whom the difference between Plato's *Republic* and Gosplan had somewhat blurred. But there was no indication in 1956 that any of this persisted in Van Doren.

Ezra Pound once said that every man's opinions should be tested one at a time. No doubt Pound had special reasons to urge this, but it remains a good general rule. I am not saying that, on the evidence, presiding as a Naval Intelligence Officer over security clearances, I would have recommended access to top secret material for Van Doren, but I do not think that his wild misjudgments during the five years after World War II should be allowed to interfere with our judgment of his excellences. I notice, for example, that in a very important recent essay, William Pritchard pays particular notice to Van Doren's book on Shakespeare.[1] Van Doren probably began in gladness, out there in Illinois, but I'm sure he did not end in madness.

It must have been in the early 1960s when I last saw him. On a warm Spring afternoon the window was open in my office in Columbia's Hamilton Hall, which looked out on the peaceful Van Amringe Quadrangle with its surrounding rectangle of McKim, Mead & White brick and limestone buildings. The statue of Alexander Hamilton in the foreground reinforced the sense of classical enlightenment. Through the open window one of the numerous local pigeons had flown and now walked on my carpet, strolling calmly back and forth. Then Mark came through my door wearing his familiar floppy gray felt hat, rather in the older Max Perkins tradition. He saw the pigeon, grinned, said to me, "Saint Francis." This is the closest I will ever come to sainthood.

Mark Van Doren's health began to fade unexpectedly in the early 1970s, and he learned that he was dying while his last volume of poems was in the press. Rather characteristically, he entitled the volume *Good Morning*. Earlier, he had written:

Eternity is now or not at all
Waited for, a wisp: remembered, shadows,
Eternity is solid as the sun:
As present; as familiar; as immense.

---

1 William Pritchard, "The Shakespeherian Rag" in *Talking Back To Dickinson* (Massachusetts, 1998).

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Letters

Lightening the load

To the Editors:
Paul Dean's review (March 2000), of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* is generously stimulating, and I am grateful. One point, though. "There is nothing from *The Prelude* in the Wordsworth section." Not altogether so. For the sixty-three lines of "Influence of Natural Objects in Calling Forth and Strengthening the Imagination in Boyhood and Early Youth" form part of *The Prelude*. The lines, published by Wordsworth in collections from 1815, constitute one of the early five passages of *The Prelude* known to the public during his lifetime (for he never published *The Prelude*). It seemed to me courteous to include the lines not as an excerpt but as the autonomous poem that Wordsworth made public. Opening with fourteen lines of magnificent invocation ("Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!"), and turning then to the deeply remembered skating scene, "Influence of Natural Objects . . ." constitutes a poem in itself that is furthermore one of the greatest—and most famous—passages from *The Prelude* (I: 428–89 in 1805; I: 401–63 in 1850).

Christopher Ricks
Editorial Institute
Boston University

Tiresias redux

To the Editors:
In your April issue Theodore Dalrymple writes of Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing*: "Everything Professor McCloskey says of his sex change could have been said had he been a necrophiliac instead of a transsexual."

I can not even begin to express how offensive this comment is. Transsexualism is a well-recognized, well-studied medical condition for which there is an accepted and accredited treatment—sex reassignment surgery. Transsexualism is about gender identity. It is not about sexual proclivity, a fact clearly laid out in McCloskey's work.

However Dr. Dalrymple may feel about the critical merit of the memoir, your editor ought to have shown much more sense than to allow Dalrymple's own perversities to overcome his critical position.

Katherine Monteiro
Providence, RI

Theodore Dalrymple replies:
Is Ms. Monteiro suggesting that necrophilia is not a well-recognized medical condition? Is she suggesting that sexual proclivity (though not sexual identity) should be subject to moral censure? Tut tut, how very judgmental of her.

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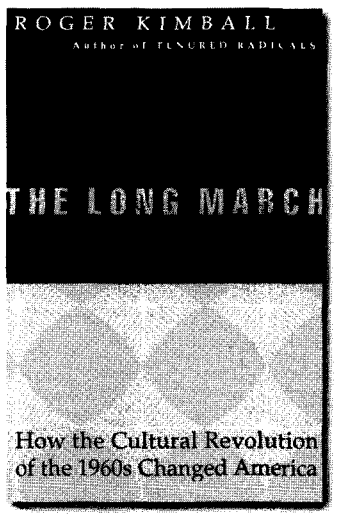

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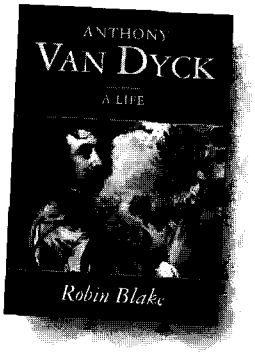
Anthony Van Dyck



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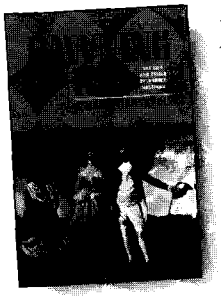

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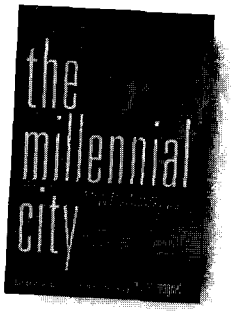

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